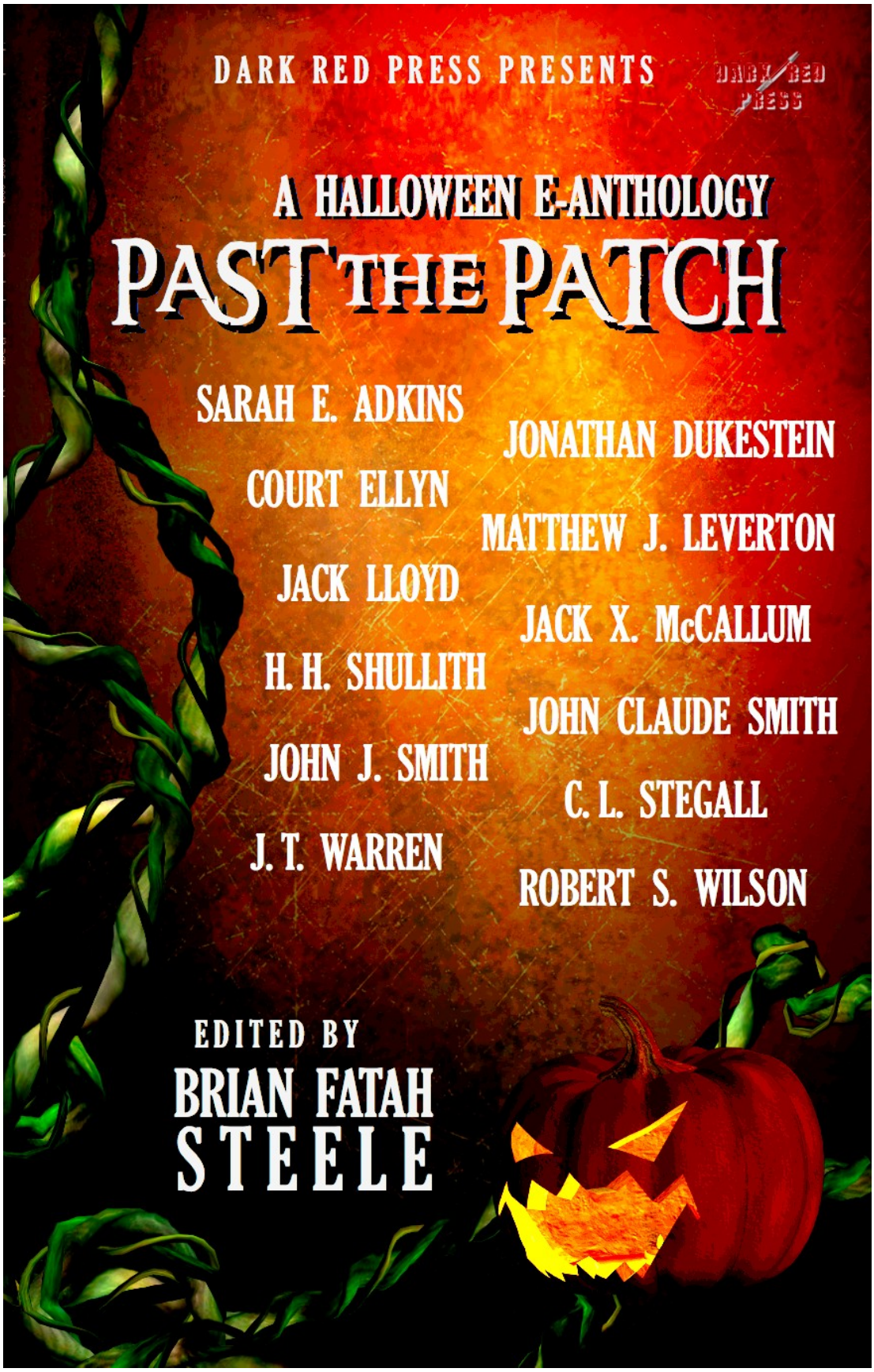
DARK RED PRESS PRESENTS
DARK RED PRESS
A HALLOWEEN E-ANTHOLOGY
PAST THE PATCH
SARAH E. ADKINS
COURT ELLYN
JACK LLOYD
H. H. SHULLITH
JOHN J. SMITH
J. T. WARREN
JONATHAN DUKESTEIN
MATTHEW J. LEVERTON
JACK X. McCALLUM
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EDITED BY
BRIAN FATAH STEELE

A Dark Red Press Presentation

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"The Witch Of Mistletoe Lane" (c) 2011 by Court Ellyn

For that terrible tapping at the twilight window, the boogeyman lurking beneath our beds, and the creatures creaking the closet door – we salute you!

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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

This is not a collection of horror stories, but a collection of Halloween stories - there's a difference. Now, given the nature of the holiday, you're going to find a great deal of horror crammed within a number of these tales, but not all of them. That was never the purpose of this anthology, simply another genre collection, but an attempt for authors of various styles to all throw their talents at one theme.

I'm quite pleased with the result.

As an author and reader, I've consumed quite a bit of material by now in my mid-thirties. While my tastes run wild and varied, it has been the anthologies by the likes of John Joseph Adams, Al Sarrantonio and (of course) Harlan Ellison that have always stood out to me. Why? Because they know how to capture a concept as editors, they know how to see the forest for the trees. If I've pulled together even a fraction of that dark magic inside here, I'll feel successful.

Dark Magic. I remember feeling it the first time I stumbled upon *Borderlands 2,* edited by Thomas F. Monteleone when I was still too young to fully grasp the madness in the pages. An amazing, imaginative and grotesque collection by names I didn't recognize then, it had a definite impact. I still have the battered paperback to this day.

Now, there are many reasons why this anthology is free. I could say it's because I didn't want to be bothered with royalties and financial issues, and that would be partly true. Mostly, however, it's because these are rising authors who deserve to be read and in this Wild West market, "free" works out nicely for everyone. There's also the fact that Dark Red Press just likes folks out there to be able to read cool stuff.

So here you go, stroll on past the patch and see what you find.

Try not to get eaten. 'Cause that would suck.

Brian Fatah Steele
October, 2011

HALLOWEEN CANDY
J.T. Warren

J.T. Warren was born on Halloween, a few months after his mother saw *Jaws* at the movies. His affinity for horror can be traced to an early age when he built a coffin out of cardboard and pretended to be a corpse, much to the concern of his parents. He can still be found in a coffin on Halloween when he gets into the spirit of the season. He is a public school teacher and has successfully lured thousands of students into literary waters through works of horror. He hopes his writing will further encourage young adults, and everyone older, to discover the wonder (and dread) found in the written word. J.T. Warren is the pseudonym for a much creepier guy. He is the author of *Hudson House*, *Blood Mountain*, *Calamity*, and *Violent Glimpses: Five Dark Plays*. Each is available as an ebook.

***

I was restocking the million different varieties of baby lotion when the fight erupted at the far end of the aisle. I had seen something similar to this many times in my life as a stock boy and had even once witnessed an old lady beat a man over the head with an umbrella because he had snatched the last box of turkey stuffing.

This was nothing so grand. Two young boys, maybe four or five-years-old, were running around playing some ridiculous version of tag only they understood while Mommy was standing next to her shopping cart, infant child strapped in the front seat, box of diapers in her hand. She was reading the box, turning it over, reading whatever she could find. Probably reading the bar code. I imagined she was debating whether to take the chance on this different brand of diaper with the reinforced grip tabs because little baby Willie was always ripping off his diapers at the most inopportune times, especially after making a fresh deposit. Whatever the mother's internal debate, she was too engrossed in the fine print on the diaper box to notice that her two other little darlings had morphed from sweet playmates into vicious enemy combatants.

The little boy wearing a bright red T-shirt slapped the other little boy who was in a shirt with a smiling jack-o-lantern on it. That poor kid started crying in loud, rolling sobs. Mommy's head twitched but her eyes did not venture off the diaper box. "Play nice," Mommy said.

The crier stopped his outburst and leveled his gaze at his brother. The red shirt boy started laughing. I could imagine that kid years hence tripping some unsuspecting victim in a high school hallway and grinning when the kid tumbled full-sprawl, books and papers spilling everywhere.

"You're it!" the future bully yelled.

"No!" the other boy shouted back. "No! No!"

"Boys," Mommy said in a plain, flat tone. She was rereading the front of the diaper box. Little Willie was sucking on his fingers. His plump face reminded me of mushy balls of Play-Doh.

"It!" the red shirt boy said again. "It! It! *IT!*"

The boy in the pumpkin shirt growled and lunged at his laughing brother. The bully saw it coming and sidestepped, but as he did, he placed his little hands on his

brother's back and shoved him hard.

I saw what was going to happen and though I was at least watching, I was as unhelpful as the boys' own mother, though I wouldn't have been able to do much anyway considering the brace on my left leg. The kid with the grinning pumpkin on his shirt collided into the shelves. His face was at the perfect height to take a metal-shelf hit right in the forehead. His face smacked with a resounding metallic warble and I thought maybe that would be the end but as a stock boy I knew that was too much to hope for.

Above the boy, the dozens and dozens of baby food glass jars wobbled in their little towers and tumbled from their appointed spots. The kid even glanced up as if he sensed that the shelf hit was not to be his only embarrassment at his brother's hand. I wanted to yell out, to tell the kid to back up, or duck and cover, but there wasn't any time. I had a flash of a thought--*this is going to be bad*--and then the jars were falling.

The first casualty cracked onto the white tile floor and split open like a gourd to reveal its mushy orange insides. Several other jars hit the floor around the boy in rapid popping succession like each jar of food was a mini grenade, like the damn things were filled with so much pressure they were just waiting for the slightest extra stress to explode. The jars ruptured and spewed their multi-colored contents. Glass shards sprayed across the floor. Tiny arcs of white fluorescent light flashed off them as they scattered.

The first jar to smack the kid was filled with a dark red gunk that was supposed to be squash. If I could have taken a snapshot, it would have gotten a million hits on-line: the little kid frozen in disbelief, head tilted back, jars of baby food cascading around him, and one jar of red squash-like stuff just crashing onto the bridge of his tiny nose, the black and white face of the chubby Gerber baby grinning stupidly off the label.

Then the kid fell backwards. His ass hit first and he might have stayed that way in the classic *I've-just-fallen* little kid pose of shock and helplessness, but a trio of jars conked the top of his head--*thwak, thwonk, thunk*.

A full second after the onslaught ended, one last jar of brown baby food tipped off a high shelf and crashed on the floor between the little boy's spread legs. It looked like the poor kid had crapped himself. As if to punctuate that final glass-popping explosion, the little kid with the pumpkin on his shirt unleashed an epic howl of pain.

Mommy was running over, her face twisted in an expression of shock and sympathy and guilt and anger and, after she spotted me at the opposite end with a bottle of coconut butter baby lotion in hand, embarrassment.

She scooped up her child, his arms outstretched and eager to wrap around Mommy's neck. She tried to coo away his pain but he only sobbed louder and louder. She examined his face, rubbed something off his forehead and peered close at his skin as she had been peering at that box of diapers.

The other boy, the future bully in the red T-shirt, stood off to the side. The floor before him was a mess of baby mush and jagged glass fangs. I was up and moving toward him as best as I could, the metal brace clacking against the floor, my hand coming up to tell him not to step on the glass (I could imagine him going forward, sneakers sliding in the food, him falling forward, catching the ground with his hands where glass sliced each of his palms in brilliant crimson arcs like bloody smiles) when I stopped.

The kid was staring at me. A huge smile stretched his lean face into a gruesome mask that could have been molded into one of those flimsy plastic Halloween disguises I

had recently stocked in the seasonal aisle. He giggled and then laughed outright. I tried to tell myself that the boy was just a young kid. Kids always laughed when other people got hurt because they didn't understand. They lacked empathy. This kid's laughter, however, came so easily and his little eyes stayed focused on me as if he knew damn well that he was laughing at his brother's misery. In that face I saw all the people who had ever made fun of me, kids who called me "Limpy" or "Cripple" or "Retard Walker." In that tiny laugh, I heard the cruelty of my shift manager Freling who always sent me out stocking shelves near the end of my shift when my leg was throbbing and I couldn't conceal the pain on my face. I've known him since high school. At least he doesn't call me "retard" on the sales floor.

In that moment, I could have punched that kid.

Then Mommy called for her boy and the kid ran off. He did not slip in the spilled mush, but when I got close, I saw the grooved imprint of one tiny sneaker. He had managed to avoid the glass entirely. I needed to do my best to clean this up and then get the mop and the rolling garbage can and one of those CAUTION WET FLOOR signs.

I can squat down if I have to but the pain is quite intense and the brace requires I have something to lean on otherwise I might tip right over. Instead of trying and possibly ending up coated with baby food, I bent over and started scooping the mush to one side. The smell was faintly acidic and nauseating.

Mommy and family disappeared around the corner of the aisle where the big Halloween candy display had been erected. Nothing like a little candy to soothe away the pain and humiliation. My mother had been the same way: The kids called me a freak, Mom. You're not a freak, baby. Here, have a Snickers. Even now, I keep one in my pocket for when I need emotional comfort.

Someone was standing next to me. I thought it was Freling, figured he'd make some kind of comment about me making more of a mess or ask if I was eating the stuff and why didn't I just go get the mop already? Yes, master. Then I'd hobble away.

But it wasn't Freling. It was a young girl, maybe eight-years-old. She stood next to me in a black dress with a pointy black witch hat perched perfectly on her head. Long dark hair ran down her back.

"Careful," I said. "There's glass."

"That boy was mean," the little girl said.

"You saw?"

The girl's face was pale, her eyes large and dark. "My brother was like that."

"Some people are," I said.

The girl watched me, noticed the brace on my leg. Kids always ask about it. They're curious. They ask, what happened?; does it hurt?; are you deformed?; do you shower with it on? This time of year, I sometimes joke that I make one hell of a zombie, and then I do an overdone stuttering gait, hands out in classic *hungry-for-flesh* style. Kids laugh when I do that. Freling says I should take my act on the road, join one of those freak shows that perform in circus tents.

"Some people need to be taught," the little girl said.

"I guess they do," I said.

She reached toward one of the destroyed jars. It had once contained something that resembled green vomit.

"Careful, sweetie," I said and put my hand out to stop her. "You don't want to get

cut."

"It's okay," she said. Her hand moved from the busted glass jar and her fingers plucked a small shard from the muck that was already beginning to dry into a crust. Her fingers curled around the piece of glass. "Will you help me find my Mommy?"

The question was so unexpected and sincere that I was no longer sure if I had seen her pick up that fractured section of glass. She held out her other hand and I took it. Her skin was soft and cold like she'd been outside for a long time. She led me through the mess toward the end of the aisle.

"That's a nice hat," I said. "You're going to be a witch for Halloween?"

The girl didn't say anything for a moment. "It wasn't right what he did to you," she said. "It's not right what he does still."

"What do you mean?"

"He knew you'd get hurt," she said. "He knew it and he was happy."

We reached the end of the aisle. The huge Halloween display stretched out before us in all its cliche macabre grandeur. A giant cardboard mausoleum bedecked in fake spider webs offered entrance to bins and bins of bags of candy, each filled with individually wrapped pieces perfect for trick-or-treaters. Plastic skeletons dangled from the ceiling and a motorized witch cackled every time someone got within a foot of it. A big sign proclaimed, *Have a Spook-tacular Holiday!*

The woman with her infant and two boys were scrounging through the bottomless bins of candy. The boy with the pumpkin shirt was rubbing his red eyes but seemed basically okay. The kid in the bright red shirt grabbed a big bag of snack-sized chocolate bars and held it over his head.

"I want!" the boy yelled.

"Okay," Mommy said. "You can open it and have one candy, but be sure to share with your brother."

As the red shirt kid tore open the bag and several bars tumbled to the floor, the kid's brother turned hesitantly toward him. The kid smiled at him the way he had smiled at me and both the little boy and I knew his brother wasn't going to share any candy with him. He ripped open a tiny package and bit into the candy with a large, greedy bite.

"Where's Mommy?" I asked.

The girl tugged on my hand, stared up into my face. Her eyes seemed older, like they had been transplanted from an elderly person, each eye shining beneath a dull sheen, a shape seen through curtains.

"It's not too late," she said. "Not too late to teach *him*."

She pulled out of my grip and was through the cardboard stone entrance before I could say anything. She went right to the boy in the red shirt. They started talking. Mommy was now distracted by the sudden cries of baby Willie to see any of this.

The red shirt boy held out a candy bar to the girl in the witch hat. She shook her head and then after a moment of hesitation, the kid handed over two bars. The girl took them, turned to the kid in the pumpkin shirt and gave him one. He took it slowly, as if thinking it was a trick, and then smiled real large when the girl said something to him.

The girl opened the other piece of candy and looked over her shoulder at me. I smiled, feeling a warm sensation spread inside me. There was cruelty in the world but there was also goodness. There was always a choice.

The girl held the open bar before her and then brought her other hand to it. Light

bounced off the fragment of glass before she buried it in the chocolate. She patted the bar down with her fingers and went back to the kid in the red shirt. She held it out to him and he took it eagerly, all smiles. He was still smiling as he took the first bite.

"What the hell are you doing?" I jumped in surprise and Freling laughed. He had come up behind me. He was wearing a blue dress shirt with an ugly brown tie. His manager name tag hung crookedly on his sagging breast pocket. "Careful, Chubs," he said. "You don't want to fall and put the other leg in a brace, too." Chubs was his other name for me. When he wasn't mocking my leg, he went after my gut.

"Right," I said.

"Were you going to stand here watching kids like some perv or did you plan on cleaning up that mess back there?"

It wasn't right what he did to you, the little girl had said. *It's not right what he does still*.

Freling had been the one who said the slope was open, the one who said he had just skied it, the one who called me a pussy for hesitating. Of course, I was the one who skied down it and crashed into a snowmaking machine. I was the one lucky to not be paralyzed.

"Sure," I said.

"You want me to hold your hand?" Freling said.

The little girl was looking at me again. She didn't smile, she didn't acknowledge me, but I knew what she was trying to tell me. *He knew you'd get hurt. He knew it and he was happy*. She was right about that. I had known that ever since freshman year when it happened.

It's not too late. Not too late to teach him.

"I got it," I said.

"Good," Freling said. "Now get hobbling." He walked away.

The girl held my gaze a moment longer and then she was running out of the Halloween display and through the store. Her long black hair trailed behind her. The witch hat never wavered.

I turned back to the aisle of exploded baby food. It looked like a monster had spewed out the contents of its enormous stomach. I walked slowly toward the mess. My brace clacked along with me. The Snickers weighed heavily in my pocket.

Glass shards gleamed before me like a million stars upon which I might wish. There is cruelty and there is goodness too. There's always the choice. Sometimes, however, that choice is made for us.

I took the candy bar out of my pocket and was bending toward a particularly nasty-looking chunk of glass with its numerous sharp fangs when the woman at the candy display started screaming.

THE JACK LANTERN
Jack X. McCallum

A founding member of Dark Red Press, Jack McCallum lives in Northern California. His writing ranges from graphic horror to tales for younger readers. He also writes screenplays and makes inexcusably awful short films.

***

Territory Northwest of the River Ohio
October, 1800

"I'm scared, da," Stephen said from the back of the wagon. "There might be haunts in the woods."

"Me too," Molly said.

"You should be asleep, young miss," Francis said to his daughter. He lifted a flap of canvas and looked back into the covered wagon, trying not to laugh when Molly pulled a blanket over her head. "And you should be on the watch for trouble, young man." Stephen nodded, but he was still frightened.

Molly was six. She was easily upset. Stephen was nine. He should have been hardier, but it seemed both children had inherited their mother's belief in ghouls and ghosts and God.

"Be still, children," Laura said, tucking the canvas flap back in place. She was sitting on the seat beside her husband as he watched the horses and what passed for a road in this uncivilized country. "You have your father's skill and your mother's faith to protect you."

Francis turned away and said nothing, having been married long enough to know that his Scottish wife's wrath was greater than that of her God. The children were living the life of leisure. When Francis was nine he was already working, and by the age of sixteen, he was at war. That will change soon enough, Francis thought. There will be plenty of work ahead for all of us.

One hundred acres of land. The thought was enough to make him swoon. One hundred acres, *his* land, land for his family and his descendants. Francis' father had been a cordwainer's assistant in Roxbury during the start of the Revolutionary War, and not a very proficient one. Francis often wondered if his father shouldn't have lived up to the Applebaker family name and become a baker instead. His mother and father declared themselves Loyalists and British subjects. They were aghast when their son became entranced with the Patriot's cause and enlisted in the Continental Army in January of 1776, something Francis could not have done without his parents' consent if he had been a year younger. His father called him a *damned Liberty Boy*. His mother and father perished in a fire started by British soldiers while Francis had been digging trenches near the Charlestown Neck. Much older and a little wiser now, Francis realized he had been too young to grasp the greater principals involved at the time, but since he had fought for his country he had been given his reward, his bounty, a deed to one hundred virgin acres in the far western reaches of the Northwest Territory.

This land, this freedom, had cost him six years of service and one eye. It was a

fair trade.

With the new century, the Applebaker family was starting a new life.

Francis gave the reins a gentle flick and urged the horses along the nearly imperceptible ruts that corresponded to the trail on his map.

On the side of the trail behind them was a dry jumble of bones. As the Conestoga wagon had rolled past the bones Lorna had gasped and asked if they were human, the remains of someone mercilessly slaughtered by the heathen Indians. Francis had laughed and told her and the children who were peeping through folds in the wagon's canvas cover that they were looking at the bones of a deer. That was a lie. He had seen bodies split, gutted and flayed by cannon fire. The bones were human, but he didn't want to worry his family. He put the shattered bones out of his mind.

The wagon rocked back and forth on the poor excuse for a road, the wooden frame creaking softly. The trees were close and dark, growing right to the edge of the trail.

The sun was disappearing behind a hill. The eastern sky was dark; the western sky was the color of blood and bruises. The evening air was crisp. It was nearly the middle of October. The year was growing late.

Jefferson came out from the back of the wagon. He was a young gray and white tom cat who liked to sleep among the sacks of cornflower and bundled clothing. He spent most of his waking hours peering under a flap of canvas in the rear of the wagon. Strapped to the frame were four cages holding a rooster and three hens. They kept a tether on Jefferson. They didn't want him wandering until they reached their own plot of land. A log cabin was an open house for mice and other vermin. Jefferson would have to earn his keep.

Francis had checked his map an hour ago and thought they were quite close to their new homestead. He was to look for a clearing near the edge of the road. His acreage would be indicated by a whitewashed wooden stake bearing a number. The entire family would have to work quickly to build a shelter before the snow came, but a simple cabin was all they needed as they had supplies to see them through the first winter, and there was a stream on their new land.

It was so quiet here; there were no sounds but the calls of night birds and the croaks and chirps of frogs and crickets. The stars to the east looked like a handful of salt spilled on black velvet.

Jefferson slipped under the flap of canvas, returning to his bed.

Francis glanced at his wife, his lovely, pious wife. She and Molly had golden curls and pale green eyes. Stephen took after Francis, with eyes like gray flint and dark hair. Lorna had a smudge of dirt on her left cheek and her eyes seemed to hold the fading light of day.

The first time he had ever seen her unclothed, her pale green eyes and porcelain skin glowing in the golden light of an oil lamp on their wedding night, he had whispered, "Blessed *Jesus*." Lorna had smiled at that, and after they lay together she had gotten down on her knees beside their bed and prayed the Lord forgive her husband for taking His name in vain and to forgive her the sin of pride when she took pleasure in his admiring gaze. Lorna was a Scottish Presbyterian who had been raised in an almost Puritanical faith. Francis was a godless American who had become mad with arousal when he saw her kneeling naked and asking for forgiveness. He never told her that. She

probably would have chopped off his manhood instead of laying with him a second time.

"It's you who've done that to the boy's head," Francis said. "Filling it with all that tripe about spooks and witchery."

Lorna was uneasy, having never been this far from civilization, but she cocked a defiant eyebrow at her husband. "Don't let pride lead you by the nose and steer you into damnation," Her voice was sheer music with an Edinburgh lilt, even when she snapped at him. "You may have served well in the war and been granted a fine parcel of far-flung land, but there are no armies and little government in the Northwest Territory, my love, and the only one watching over us is the Lord God."

Francis said nothing. He wouldn't be surprised if the cat or horses spoke up next. He ground his teeth. At this rate he'd have no teeth left in his final years. Not that he had many years left. He was forty years old, after all. Forty! His life was more than half over and he was only now building a homestead. Madness.

Yet he wouldn't let Lorna know how afraid he was, afraid of starting a life in the wilderness and leaving behind a comfortable house in Pennsylvania, and afraid of failing his family.

Family! It seemed like only yesterday he was an eager sixteen year old signing up to march with the Continental Army against the English and their King. Now he had a family, and sometimes he worried late into the night, debating every step he should take along this road they were on. If Lorna knew of his fear she would have him in on his knees asking for guidance, and the only thing he ever received from prayer was splinters.

They had to take this chance. They *had* to. Far from the noise and the crowds, the corruption and violence of city life . . . far from any reasons for war. Their new home would be a haven.

They passed a faded sign made from two planks, large words of warning writ in whitewash.

BE WARY AT NIGHT
TIL OCTOBER IS DONE
KEEP A FIRE AT NIGHT
JACK LIKES IT NONE

Lorna leaned close to Francis and he wondered how she could smell so sweet when he smelled of sweat and grime and tobacco. "Have you heard talk of the Horror of the Territory?" She was whispering now. "They say it is out there, roaming the woodlands. That beast, that abomination created by Satan to turn nature against us."

Francis pointed down the rutted path and brought the horses to a stop.

In the distance was a homestead in a clearing. It was a long log cabin. firelight glowed behind the oiled paper covering the windows; no one could afford panes of glass in this wilderness. As Francis watched he saw a brighter light bobbing outside and heard the creak and rattle of wooden shutters being secured.

He urged the horses down the road, and by the time he reached the path leading to the homestead a man was standing there with a lantern at his feet and a rifle slung across one arm.

"Greetings," Francis said. "I am—"

"Francis Applebaker, no doubt."

"Yes," Francis said, hopping down from the wagon and slipping on his eye patch. He was uncomfortable with anyone but his family seeing the five-pointed star of scar tissue which was all that remained of his right eye.

"Michael Fish," the man said, extending a hand. He was a big man with a big belly, and a white fringe of whiskers along his jaw. "I am a fellow veteran. I'm to let you know that your parcel is just a few miles further down the road. It's an enviable location. You've been treated well." He laughed and said, "You must have shot balls through many a British skull."

And they returned the favor, Francis thought, shaking his head. "No, I've simply been touched by fortune's grace. We'll be neighbors then?"

"Aye," Fish replied. "One of the few good things to come out of the war, a plot of land away from all the hogwash in the east." Fish looked west and watched the last of the light fade from the sky. "You'll want to stay with me tonight. I have five children and a wife, but I'm sure we can all squeeze in together. Safer, you see."

Francis was surprised by the offer. He was told that settlers could be hostile, preferring their isolation. "We would not want to impose. We can pitch a perfectly serviceable tent with our wagon canvas and—"

"Nonsense," Fish said. He looked into the dark woods nearby. "You've not heard of the Punkin Man?"

Francis heard the wagon creak behind him and turned to help Lorna out of the carriage. He saw that the children were peeking out from behind the canvas flap.

"Lord, you're a fine one," Fish said.

Lorna blushed. "What were you saying about a pumpkin?"

"The Punkin Man," Fish said again, lowering his voice. "Come every October he walks the woods in the dark of night, wandering near and far, filling his belly to sleep through the winter, some say. He's called Big Jack, the Punkin Man. A horrible Pagan beast sired by the cold seed of Satan himself. And Jack don't just have a taste for the white man, no, he'll eat any savage in his grasp, from Chickasaw to Kickapoo."

Lorna gasped and pressed one hand against her bosom. Francis hid his sudden laugh with a cough, covering his mouth with one hand like a powdered dandy.

"Sir," Francis said, "I would ask you to not speak of such things. My children have sharp ears."

"They should know what walks the land at this time of year," Fish said. "I've seen him myself. Tall he was, with limbs as strong as the roots of an oak, and a great round punkin for a head."

"Of course," Francis said. He turned and took Lorna's arm. "Thank you for the offer of creature comforts, sir, but we will manage fine with our tent."

Lorna was horrified. "Francis Applebaker!" Of Fish she asked, "Sir, do you speak of . . . the Horror?"

Fish nodded.

Francis' patience was waning. "I'm not going to let this fellow cause the children to suffer fits of the imagination with his fables of—"

"Fables!" Fish was instantly enraged. "I'm trying to save their lives, you buffoon! I've seen that creature attack, seen it with my own eyes. I saw him tear a dozen Missouri Indians to pieces! He consumed their legs and hind parts, leaving nothing but naked bone below the waist, and then he tore apart their remains like a mad dog. If the heathens had

been white men I would have given them a Christian burial. I can show you their remains if you need proof. If it wasn't for my lantern shedding light like the wisdom of God that fire-fearing thing might very well be attacking *now*. "

"Enough," Francis said. He gave Lorna a gentle push toward the wagon, but she had planted her feet like a stubborn mule. He wanted to swat her rump to get her moving. Instead he lifted her up onto the seat of the wagon.

"My friend," Fish said, "Forgive my temper. I am only concerned for your safety. You must not be in the woods at night at this time of year. We should be inside now that night has come. Please, reconsider and stay with us."

Francis drew a breath and thought a moment. He could be rude to this man or make him a friend. In the Territory, a good neighbor could be the difference between life and death.

He put a hand on Fish's shoulder. "Thank you, sir, but we must go on. At first light we need to begin clearing land for a cabin which I hope will be as fine as yours. But I promise you that at the first sign of trouble we will come to you for aid."

Fish was not pleased with this decision, but he could see that Francis' mind was set. "Very well, but keep your horses ready, keep a watch, and keep a fire burning in the hearth. The Devil's bastard hates fire, he does. Be safe, my friends."

Francis climbed up onto the wagon and gave Fish a wave and then the Applebaker family continued traveling down the trail.

"He had a huge belly," Molly said a moment later.

Stephen laughed so hard he fell over onto a sack of corn meal, that corn meal acting as a preservative for their limited supply of eggs. This caused Lorna to refresh her son's memory on the torments of Hell suffered by inattentive and destructive little boys.

Francis was laughing as well.

"If you ever get so overstuffed I don't know what I'll do," Lorna said, rubbing Francis' firm stomach with a warm hand.

"Stop that," he whispered, "I've got to keep my attention on the task at hand."

Lorna gave him a mischievous smile, and then climbed into the back of the wagon to light a lantern. They set the lantern on a pole and soon saw the numbered sign for their tract of land.

Francis and Stephen quickly set up a small tent on level ground, using the canvas from the wagon and two of the arched ribs that held up the canvas. Molly was already asleep on a bed of folded blankets by then.

Lorna started a fire; their late meal was cornmeal mush fried in bacon grease. Thinking of Fish, Francis started a second fire thirty feet from the first. He wasn't worried about bugbears in the woods. He was worried about Indians. Some were friendly. Some were not.

He carried his longrifle in one hand and a lantern in the other as he looked for the stream on his land. He found it beyond a heavy overgrowth of trees. The water was cold and sweet. When he returned he saw that Stephen had dug a shallow hole and hung a blanket on a branch as a screen for their privy.

Later, as Lorna, Stephen and Molly slept in the partially covered wagon, too unnerved by what Fish had said to sleep in the tent, Francis sat by the fire sipping coffee. As a boy he had never acquired a taste for the tea his mother and father drank. It was in the Continental Army that he first sipped the national drink. It was his only vice. "Better

to have you drinking that than stinking of tobacco," Lorna had once said. There was no moon, and the stars overhead were magnificent. After a while Francis dozed, sitting upright by the fire.

The next morning he awoke to the smell of oatmeal and more coffee. Stephen was off getting fresh water. Lorna was quizzing Molly. Francis admired his wife for schooling the children at every opportunity, and he knew the children detested it. "I won't have my son cleaning stables or toting a gun to earn his keep," she once said, "and I won't have my daughter raised as a pampered simpleton fit only for marriage, the kitchen and the nursery."

The thought that his children might one day write their own correspondence and read books from cover to cover filled him with pride. Francis knew his numbers, but he was nearly illiterate. Perhaps that's why I've no time for the Bible, he thought. I can't read the damnable thing.

"What document led to this former colony becoming a country?" Lorna asked Molly. "And be exact, young lady."

"The Declaration . . ." Molly said, writing the words on her slate with a stick of chalk, "of Independence."

Lorna checked the slate carefully, looking for any misspelled words.

The only words on that slate I know how to spell are *the* and *of,* Francis thought. If the boy doesn't inherit Lorna's brains I'll have to make sure I teach him how to use his hands.

He saw Stephen then. The boy was waving to him, out of sight of his mother and sister. When Francis joined him Stephen whispered, "In the stream, da." They moved through the overgrowth of trees together.

It was a dead Indian, caught up on rocks in a narrow part of the stream.

"He just come bobbing along like an apple as I was filling the water bucket," the boy said.

The Indian was wearing the ragged remains of a tanned hide shirt. His face had strong lines, twisted by the horror he experienced as he died. From the waist down he was naked. The soft meat of his thighs, buttocks and privates had been stripped away, leaving naked bone.

"Unfortunate bastard," Francis said.

Stephen reached out with a stick and poked at the dead man. "Do you think it was animals?"

Perhaps a bear could have caused the look of terror frozen on the Indian's face, Francis thought, but animals would have eaten more. They would have ravaged the face, the eyes. Francis had seen more than his share of corpses eaten by wolves or picked at by birds during the war.

"Most likely," he lied. "Help me get him out of the stream. We'll find a place to bury him and ask your mother to say a prayer. And don't say a word about his condition. If she asks, just say he was dead. No need to offend her sensibilities."

"Bury him, da? I thought the red men were heathens?"

"I don't know what they believe, if anything at all. But we should show our respects for a man who died, savage or not. If he's meant to be laid in the ground, so be it. If not, at least he won't be exposed to the elements."

They buried the man downstream before they asked for a few words from Lorna.

Stephen kept Molly occupied by their camp while Lorna said a prayer over a mound of fresh-turned earth.

A short time later Lorna, Stephen and even Molly were clearing undergrowth from the place where they would build their cabin, while Francis took his axe and began felling trees. A little cabin now, and one day, a great house, Francis thought.

Two weeks passed without incident, and Francis had almost forgotten the warning from Fish. October was almost done. It was the evening of the 31st and Francis was relaxing on a stump that was now his nightly seat by one of the fires outside. Despite his lack of superstition he still kept two fires burning until they were all safe and secure in the cabin for the night. He liked to end his day with a sip of coffee under the stars. The air was chilly now and he could almost smell snow on the way. He glanced at the cabin, proud, and sore. There was an ache in his back that had never been there when he was young.

It was very quiet here, day and night. From time to time they heard the distant rhythmic sound of Fish chopping wood down the road, and once they heard one of his children squealing with laughter, but otherwise the only sounds were the chuckle of water in the stream and the wind in the trees.

After their first week they had visited the Fish family, Francis presenting them with four fine trout. Mrs. Fish, her name was Adeline, gave them a fine blueberry pie in return.

The cabin took most of their time, from sunrise to sunset. The family had first laid a foundation of flat rocks from the river, tamping them down with wooden mallets until they were level and then covering them with dirt that would be replaced with a rough wooden floor during the winter. Then they constructed a simple cabin of notched logs. It was twenty feet wide by twenty long, a tight space for four, but in the spring they would begin building a house. Francis had been fortunate. Most of the citizen soldiers he served with in the Continental Army were men of skill, not means, and he had learned a great deal from them.

"We need a fireplace," Lorna had reminded him every day as the cabin took shape.

When the cabin walls and roof were complete, Lorna and Molly filled the gaps between the logs with clay from the river. The family brought some small parts of their future house with them, including hinges and a latch for the door, but for the cabin leather hinges and a sturdy crossbar would do fine. Stephen made a small chicken coop, and he was quite proud of his work. Francis made the fireplace and chimney from stones and pale clay from the river. Most of it sat outside the cabin. He made sure it was vented properly and would reflect enough heat to warm the cabin. Francis and Stephen made the sleeping loft together. It spanned the breadth and width of the cabin, leaving the floor below open for Lorna's kitchen, a corner for the children and space for Francis to work in winter. They also brought oiled paper, which they set in window frames that could be opened or closed.

Francis belched, his belly full of Lorna's skirlie, a hearty oatmeal, bacon and onion mash. That was the last of the bacon, the last of their meat, but there were deer and rabbits and squirrels in the woods, fish in the stream, and the hens had already started laying eggs.

There was still so much to do. They needed a proper privy. They needed shutters;

Francis would set Stephen to work on them in the morning while he split and planed logs for a proper floor. They needed a porch where they could knock dirt and snow off of their boots, and a roofed workspace behind the cabin where they could butcher game. Francis wanted a big comfortable chair, but that would come after a sturdy workbench, and proper chairs to replace the stumps around their table, and—

A twig snapped in the woods, a stark sound. Usually after sundown there was only the song of night birds and frogs and the stealthy rustle of mice and other foragers. Jefferson had been curled into a ball at Francis' feet, his own belly full of white-bellied mice. Now the cat stood up and stretched, his golden eyes reflecting the fires.

"Don't you go wandering—"

The cat trotted away and slipped into the dark woods.

"Cats," Francis said.

The horses were secured nearby with hobble ropes around their forelegs, so they could graze on grasses near the trail but not run off. Now they began to snort and stomp. Francis led them close to the cabin, between the fires.

The woods were illuminated by a full moon bright enough to read by, and the multicolored fall foliage took on an unearthly glow. Francis realized the frogs down by the stream had gone silent; they usually sang to each other all night.

There was a low sound, half grunt, half exclamation of surprise, not at all human.

Jefferson raced out of the trees with his ears tucked back and his tail low. Francis scooped the cat into his arms, felt claws pierce his shirt, and held the cat at arm's length by the scruff of the neck. He could feel the cat's heart hammering away.

There was the snapping of dry wood and a heavy thud. It could have been a dead tree falling over… But s*omething* had chased the cat out of the woods.

Francis carried Jefferson into the cabin, his flesh creeping as if he had been caught in a cold draft. He put a tether on the cat and tied it to an iron hook on one wall, and then barred the door.

"What is it, Francis?" Lorna whispered. She was sitting on a log seat by their crude table, stitching a tear in Stephen's trousers by candlelight. Overhead, the children were asleep in their shared bed up in the loft.

"Something is out there," he said softly. "A bear, mayhap."

That something came out of the woods and passed beyond the two fires outside. Lorna was terrified when she heard one of the horses let out a sound like a scream, and when Francis went to one of the windows as if to peek outside she grabbed his arm and shook her head.

"If it doesn't see you it won't come for you," she said.

"What won't come for me?"

"Whatever is out there," she said.

The children were awake now, peering down from then loft, sleepy and curious.

Francis reached for his longrifle where it was hung over the door and began loading the weapon.

The Applebaker family heard the most unsettling series of sounds, a soft thump like heavy footfalls, accompanied by the rattle of dry branches. Something pushed against the door, and Francis took a step back. The leather hinges were strained, but the cross bar held the door firmly closed. The rattle and thump sounds carried to one side of the house, paused, and then a thick branch punctured the oiled paper over one window.

Molly and Lorna screamed, and Stephen moved in front of his sister.

Fish reported only human remains, not animal, Francis thought, as he raised the long barrel of the rifle and aimed at the shape that was now just a shadow thrown by light from one of the fires behind it. And I've never seen any animal carcasses. What if this thing only has a taste for men?

He saw movement through the tear in the oiled paper and fired. The shot was like cannon fire inside the single large room. The ball connected and Francis heard the clatter of fragmenting wood, followed by an otherworldly moan. The shot filled the cabin with the bitter scent of burned powder.

They heard more of those odd rattling thuds as the thing moved away.

Francis guessed the thing was making for the road, and after a moment the sounds faded.

Jefferson had been standing with his back arched and his tail fluffed out. Now he relaxed, and began to wash one foot with his rough tongue.

Francis felt relieved, and immediately felt foolish and angry for feeling such relief. I am a man of the modern age, he thought, not some superstitious bumpkin! But that was no bear . . .

He opened the door, hearing Lorna gasp behind him.

The frogs were singing down by the steam again.

Francis stepped outside, and walked softly to one of the fires. Stephen followed, his mother reaching for him and failing to hold him back.

The horses were unharmed, but they were breathing fast, their hot breath white vapor in the chilly air.

There were marks in the well-packed earth around the homestead. It looked as if someone had dragged a crude wicker broom or a bundle of sticks out of the woods, in a wide arc around the fires, past the cabin and back into the woods, following a path running parallel to the road.

"Lorna," Francis called, "Put out the fire in the fireplace. Then get Molly dressed and come out here." To Stephen he said, "Help me hitch the horses to the wagon."

He and Stephen put bridles on the horses. They were strapping the horses to the wagon when Lorna appeared, carrying Molly.

"A bit late in the day for a ride, is it not?"

"Get in," he told her. "Whatever that thing was it's making its way through the woods alongside the path to the Fish house. I have to warn them, and I'm not about to leave you and the children alone."

By the time the horses were hitched securely and everyone was in the wagon, the night had grown colder. The moonlight was stark and brilliant. Francis gathered his weapons, paused to be sure the fires outside were banked and safe to leave unattended, and then snapped the reins and set off down the road.

The journey was a quick one. With the moonlight the horses were able to run as fast as they were able.

Fish must have heard the gunshot earlier and their approach now. By the time they pulled up at the end of the path near his home he was waiting for them as before, holding a lantern and his own rifle.

"Get away, get away!" Fish cried, waving them off.

"It's coming," Francis said, "And we should stand together and stop it for good. It

tried to break into my cabin, and it will likely try the same here."

Fish was shaking his head. "No, we are safe inside, safe with the fire burning! Get away!"

"It's not enough," Francis said, climbing down from the wagon. "This thing will come for you and your children unless we—"

A cascade of breaking branches echoed within the forest. It was followed by a low, drawn out rumble that seemed to surround them.

Every forest creature from birds to crickets went quiet.

"It's him," Fish said, his eyes rolling in panic. "Big Jack has heard us. Lord God Jesus Christ, save my sinning soul!" He ran back toward his cabin, the lantern swaying madly.

There was a cacophony of breaking branches as loud as gunfire in the night. Just as Fish approached the door of his home something stepped out from behind the cabin and slashed at his middle with a huge, misshapen hand. Fish let out a wretched cry.

Francis had not heard a sound like that since his time in battle, so many years before.

The lantern Fish had been carrying smashed upon the ground, spattering oil that set the front of the cabin ablaze.

Stephen and Molly peeked through the canvas flaps of the wagon, and Stephen immediately covered his sister's eyes.

Fish's rifle was snapped in two, and then the towering, indistinct thing broke Fish in two as well, grabbing Fish by the neck and the groin and bending the man backward until his spine snapped and his head touched his heels. His huge lacerated belly split open and spilled his guts upon the earth, where they steamed in the crisp night air.

Lorna screamed.

The monstrosity threw Fish flat on the ground and tore away the man's breeches. It reached out and ripped a bloody, quivering chunk of meat and fat from Fish's ample left buttock. It raised its misshapen hand, and in the light of the growing fire the flesh seemed to melt and be absorbed by the rough bark covering those crude fingers.

The oiled paper in the front window of the Fish cabin caught flame with a dramatic flaring light.

The Punkin Man backed away from the growing flames, and Francis could only stare. It seemed to be made of twisted roots and woven branches that made the shape of a man, with legs and arms and hands. Growing from the narrow stem of the neck was a huge pumpkin with two soft rotten spots that looked like eyes.

The Punkin Man began striding toward the wagon.

"Stephen," Francis said calmly. "My rifle." He and the boy had drilled for this, for trouble. Stephen was to always have his father's weapons within reach when traveling and if they were requested the boy was to hand them over, the firearms loaded with powder and shot.

The horses smelled something then, their nostrils flaring. They began to dance with fear and Lorna had to fight the reins to hold them in place.

The Punkin Man was getting closer. It was a foot taller than Francis and he was a tall man, a little over six feet. The creature's feet looked like clusters of roots ripped from the soil and there were small green buds of new growth all over its body, a body that creaked like thick branches in a strong wind with every step.

“Boy! My rifle!” Without looking back he reached out. Francis’ prized Kentucky Longrifle was set in his right hand. He swung the stock into his left palm, sighted down the long barrel and fired.

There was a sharp crack as the ball struck the Punkin Man in the chest. Splinters clattered and flew and Francis saw white pulp exposed under shredded bark. The thing let out a low rumble.

The Punkin Man was still coming.

“Pistol,” Francis said, handing the rifle back to his son without talking his eyes from the brutish thing advancing on him. He heard Stephen sniffing back fearful tears and was filled with pride when the rifle was taken and his flintlock was promptly set in his open hand.

The pistol was woefully inaccurate. Francis had cracked open more skulls using the walnut grip as a cudgel, but the Punkin Man was close enough now that the pistol could be put to use, close enough that he could see this was no perverse prank or Indian trickery. He could see through gaps in the woven chest of the thing as if looking through a thick hedge, those eye-like circles of rot in the pumpkin mesmerizing him.

He fired a single shot into one of the rotten spots that looked like malevolent eyes. Seeds and pulp blew out the back of the thing’s pumpkin head. It shuddered, moaned in a hollow, unearthly voice, and took another step forward.

Francis tossed the pistol aside and shouted, “Stephen, my sword!”

The hilt of his old French hanger kissed his palm and Francis drove the blade into the center of the Punkin Man’s head. It convulsed, and then recovered. He withdrew the blade and struck again, this time where a human heart would be seated. The steel shaft clattered against wood as strong as iron, slipping between strands braided like wicker. The Punkin Man turned sharply and Francis was nearly unmanned by the strength of the monstrosity as the sword was ripped from his grip. The Punkin Man drew the sword out of its torso and tossed it away.

Francis turned to his wife. “Go! Leave me and get the children to safety!” He had always known Lorna would make a good frontierswoman despite her prim exterior and aggravating piety and he was not proven wrong now. Praying aloud, she snapped the reins and the wagon carried the children down the road to safety.

A cry from inside the cabin caught Francis’ attention. The front of the home was now sheathed in flame. He ran past the Punkin Man and circled around to the back of the long cabin, realizing that as strong as the creature was it was not very fast. He pulled one of the shutters open and saw four children huddled together in a corner. Their mother was standing by a blanket hung on a string, a makeshift wall, holding a knife in one hand and a swaddled baby in the other. The blanket began to burn, revealing a raging fire inside the cabin that was now engulfing the roof.

Francis gestured and the children scrambled out the window with his help. Fish’s wife gave him the baby. He took it from her as the other children began to yell, *“It’s Jack, it’s Jack,”* and turned too late.

Something that felt like a staff of solid ash slammed into the right side of his head and he fell, turning to land on his back so he would not hurt the child. He looked up and saw the Punkin Man reach through the window and grab Adeline Fish with a hand formed of twisted branches. He could see flames racing across the ceiling of the cabin and scuttled backward on his haunches. In cold silence the pumpkin-headed creature

began peeling off the woman's face as she shrieked her life away. The thing let go of her and stepped back just as the roof collapsed, engulfing the woman. Burning logs and hot coals danced across the ground behind the cabin.

Francis backed up against something solid. He turned and saw a broad stump used as a chopping block, and an axe. He got to his feet, his head still reeling as he pulled the axe free of the old wood. He carefully set the baby down on the block just as the Punkin Man came for him.

He raised the axe and swung it down with all his strength. The blade was buried in the pumpkin head a moment and then he wrenched it free. He was not going to lose this weapon like he lost his sword. The thing swiped at him and his jacket, shirt and chest were sliced thrice as if by knives. Francis let out a wild cry and swung the axe again, severing the neck stem of springy green wood and sending the pumpkin head rolling across the clearing.

The Fish children were at the edge of the woods and Francis was relieved to see the oldest had taken the baby.

The body of the Punkin Man had fallen flat on its back and was thrashing at the ground, golden sap bubbling and spurting from the neck stem. Francis went to the severed head and looked into the hole created by his first strike with the axe. There was something there, inside the pumpkin, fleetingly glimpsed in the light of the burning cabin. The light shifted, and he saw more.

"My God," Francis said.

It was a writhing gray obscenity the size of a man's hand. Tentacles reached out to all sides from the central pulsating mass, and down to the green stem of the neck. One of the tentacles had been slashed by Francis' sword thrust and its blood was a thick amber liquid. As Francis watched, some of the tentacles began to pulsate and sway, and with a soft creak and muted clatter the body of twisted limbs stood and faced him.

Without thinking Francis reached down, plucked a hot coal from the ground and stuffed it deep inside the pumpkin head, the flesh of his fingers searing as he pushed the coal into the center of that writhing gray mass. The reaction was instantaneous. The tentacles thrashed madly, flailing like whips and tearing holes into the face of the pumpkin. The upright body staggered and collapsed again, this time falling into the burning cabin.

Ignoring his searing hand, Francis watched the gray blob of sinuous matter begin to twitch and shrivel. He heard the wagon pull to a stop in front of the burning house and then heard his wife soothing the Fish children.

He picked up the Punkin Man's head by the stem and set it on the chopping block. Now the slashes in the rind of the pumpkin looked like malevolent eyes and a wide, gaping mouth

The Applebaker family and the Fish children stood together as the cabin burned, watching the hot coal glow within the pumpkin head of the Horror of the Territories and hearing the thing that gave it life hiss and die.

Lorna hugged Francis, her body trembling. "What if there are more of those things? How will we keep them away?"

"If there are more of them," Francis said, "Let them come. We know how to kill them now."

The remains of the tentacled thing began to burn freely, firelight jumping within

the ragged eyes and mouth of the pumpkin.

"And to let *them* know *we* know how to slay them, every year at this time we'll light a Jack Lantern like this one, and set it in plain view to serve as a warning."

A CLOWN WALKS INTO A HALLOWEEN PARTY
C.L. Stegall

C.L. Stegall is the CEO and Cofounder of Dark Red Press, LLC, an independent publishing co-op. He spends his time creating and bantering with his DRP friends/co-workers/authors (John, Brian and Jack), developing new ideas and new ways to work for the author. He loves what he does and hopes to continue to help bring new independent authors into the public light. C.L. is the author of the paranormal fantasy novel, *The Weight Of Night,* as well as several novellas and shorter works. He lives in the Dallas area with his irrepressible Wife and two dogs who think they own the joint.

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The clown with the short red Mohawk ambled along the sidewalk leading up to the porch. As he carefully made his way up the steps to Priscilla "Priss" Jones' house, his oversized shoes slapped down on the wooden slats. Twilight had come and gone an hour ago with an unsteady silence. Now as he stood frozen in thought for a long moment, the porch light glinting off the edges of his shoes, he closed his eyes and focused on the new elements permeating the night.

From inside came a strange mixture of eerie Halloween sounds—like creaking caskets and moaning ghosts—and the strains of *Teeth* by Lady Gaga. He fondled the items lounging deep in his oversized clown pockets. Tonight. Tonight, memories would be made.

Priss had always loved Halloween. It gave her the ever-desired opportunity to throw a party and dress up in something sexy and thematic. A party girl from the time she could bounce to the beat of her dad's Zeppelin collection, Priss had the privileged upbringing of that rarest of creatures: a suburban princess. Although her mother truly loathed living outside the city, it allowed for an even higher style of living and, with her only daughter in tow, she lived the life of a modern day queen of the community. Priss took after her mother in her taste for fast men and hot cars, but little else of her personality mirrored that of her late mother.

She checked the MP3 player that sat docked in the stereo and, as the song changed to Tegan and Sara's *Walking With A Ghost*, she swayed a little to the music and smiled.

As the clown ambled up to the tub of beer sitting enticingly close to the front door, the sounds of the party fell over him like a cloak and he winced a little. Shaking off the feeling, he raised his hand to knock on the door just as it flew open to reveal a short girl in a sexy bunny outfit, reminiscent of those in the sixties within certain gentlemen's clubs. She screeched, at first in fright and then in appreciation.

"That is one bitchin' costume, dude!" she yelled too loudly, overcompensating for the music behind her.

"Thanks," he mumbled, nodding in response.

"You want a beer?" she asked as she squatted down in front of him and fished in the tub to retrieve her beverage of choice.

"No, I'm good for now," he replied.

She retrieved a silver can and quickly switched the beer to her other hand, attempting to shake the ice water from the first. "So cold!" Standing, she motioned him into the house party. “Come on in!” Her ponytail bobbed up and down as she pranced back into the living room, leaving the clown to wander in of his own accord.

He kept an eye on the bunny girl for a few seconds before scanning the rest of the partygoers. His fingers still playing over the tools in his deep pockets, he began to make his way through the thin crowd.

Priss wandered into the kitchen to make certain there were still plenty of hors d'oeuvres available for the guests. It was a smaller turnout than she had expected—due to that bitch Serena throwing her party on the same night and even the same time—so the counter remained replete with finger foods of various types and liquor bottles still three-quarters full. Priss placed her hands on her hips in exaggerated disappointment.

Last year, everyone had come to her party. There must have been forty-five people in and out. Glancing back towards the living room, she gauged less than half that number had shown up this year. She was losing her influence. That must be it. She'd talk to Misty about it and see what they could come up with to ensure they weren’t pushed aside and forgotten.

As she pondered the possibilities of more themed parties and maybe a charity bikini carwash, she felt herself sway and placed her hand on the bar to steady herself. One too many drinks, just a little too fast. She'd have to slow down in order to make it through the night without another incident like the year before last. She'd been afraid she would never live that down. Although, it seemed most of her guests had been in the same state of inebriation at the time and all was forgotten. Almost literally. She gathered herself and headed back into the living room, adjusting her coconut bra as she went.

"What's your name, dude?" asked the drunk jock in the barbarian outfit.

"Drastic Red," he replied, snapping the red suspenders at the barbarian. "Get it?" He winked at the guy like it was an inside joke and the idiot took the bait, laughing and nodding rather violently.

"Awesome, dude!" He leaned in a little closer, to stare at the safety pins that held up each corner of Red's mouth in a permanent smile. "That is one seriously cool fucking effect." The barbarian began reaching out as if to touch the pins, but stopped short at Red’s expression. It was difficult for a clown with a permanent smile to frown, but Red managed it with ease.

"Talk to you later," Red said, and the barbarian shrugged and meandered off to accost some girl in a cat suit. Watching the barbarian lean into the girl and her limbo-leaning response lessened any questioning of his decisions. Soon enough, he thought, placing the vial back into his pocket unseen. Memories made.

Red noticed Priss making her way from the kitchen. He maneuvered through the attendees as the smells of beer, wine and high-end perfume caused him no small amount of nausea. He watched Priss, keeping just outside of her line of sight, as she began to mingle with the guests. She almost looked the same, with those sparkling blue eyes and long blond hair. Even from here, he could smell the coconut oil that she'd used to enhance her island girl outfit. That was Priss. Everything in the details.

"Did it hurt?" He heard the soft voice and noticed it came from below him to the right. Red turned to see a girl in a little witch's costume sitting on the stairs beside him. She had deep brown eyes that looked far too sad for such a high-spirited gathering.

"Hi," he replied. "Did what hurt?"

"The pins. They're real, huh?"

"A little," he admitted. "You're the first to recognize their validity."

"I figured it out when I saw that." She nodded her head in the direction of his pocket and the end of the box cutter that protruded from within. He shoved it farther inside, hiding it and looked back to the girl. She looked him in the eyes. "I have one just like it," she said, her eyes then darting off to the crowd and back to him. "Do you do it often? I mean, I just do it when it all gets too much."

"Every day," he replied, suddenly understanding. It wouldn't matter much now, he thought. He inched up his right clown sleeve. There were a myriad of cuts at various points of healing. The latest one was still dark red and slightly oozing. The girl nodded.

"I suppose it's nice to know I'm not alone. Still. Sometimes I wish it would all go away. Sometimes, I wish I was someone else. Anyone else."

"We are who we are," he replied, edging over to sit next to her on the stairs. "Never be ashamed of who you are. It won't make any difference anyway." She reminded him far too much of himself.

"Life is never what you expect it to be, huh?" She glanced over at him, one corner of her mouth lifting in a sort of half-smirk.

He nodded. No time like the present. He might as well begin the evening's activities. He wasn't sure why, but he leaned over and whispered into her ear and then stood, observing her expression. It took a few seconds, but then her eyes widened for only a split second. Her neutral expression rapidly overcame her shock at his words. She glanced out at the small crowd again, making her decision. She stood from the stairs. Even standing on the bottom step she was a couple of inches shorter than Red.

"It was nice to meet you," she said. She stared at him for a moment longer, as if burning his face into her memory. He could accept that. She nodded her comprehension and said, "Have a nice night." She then made her way through the guests and left through the front door. Red watched her through a window as she disappeared into the night and thought about what was to come. Time to get to work. He scanned the crowd for the Playboy bunny.

"Have you seen Misty?" Priss asked one of the other girls. She thought her name was LaDonna or something ethnic like that. The girl shook her head, and then turned to dance with Thad, who was clumsier than usual and dressed as a barbarian. Same damned costume every year, she thought. No imagination.

Priss perused the room as she meandered through the party people and found no sign of Misty. She must have been in the toilet. Hopefully, her friend wasn't in there puking her guts out. Priss smiled at the thought that Misty might have finally overdone it. That girl was always too much in control, even for Priss. Priss liked to be in control, too; however there was always a time and place to relax and let your hair down. Yet, the one area she paid particular attention to was her associations. Priss liked to maintain a level playing field of friends. She'd learned her lesson as far back as middle school. But, she didn't want to dredge up those old memories. Now was the time to enjoy life. She headed

for the front door to grab another beer.

Two down and one to go. Drastic Red's smile painfully widened, thin rivulets of blood seeping out of the pin holes and slowly making their way down to his chin. He moved to the kitchen entryway as he watched Priss step out onto the porch. Time to dirty this game up a little, he thought. As the current song ended, he reached over to the stereo and switched out Priss' MP3 player for the one he kept in his pockets of goodies. The mood all changed as Rammstein growled out in German against the heavy backbeat and vicious guitars.

Priss had just closed the front door and taken a slow swig of her beer when the music changed dramatically. This was not on her playlist. It was angry and foreign and she wondered who the hell put this crap on. Nevertheless, the dozen or so remaining guests were jumping up and down in rhythm with the angry beat. She stomped toward the stereo. This was unacceptable. As she closed on the stereo, someone closed in on her. Suddenly, she was staring into the face of one scary ass clown.

Priss had never liked clowns. They freaked her out. All that weird makeup to make them look happier than everyone else just came across as arrogant and threatening to her. This guy had taken it to the extreme. The red, curved diamond shapes over his eyes set against the stark white face gave the impression of blood, and when she saw the safety pins pushed through his cheeks to hold his grin in place she felt a little nauseated.

The clown reached out and steadied her with strong hands. One of his eyes was a dark violet, the other a pale blue. It reminded her of...

"You don't like the music?" Red asked her. She stood wide-eyed, staring at him in wonder and revulsion and, perhaps, a bit of recognition.

"Not my style," she managed to respond.

Without another word, he swept her into a twirling, jolting dance. As he swung her this way and that, the crowd parted for their angry ballet. He couldn't help but notice how soft her skin was, how beautiful she was after all these years. He would have been aroused if it weren't for the fact that she still had not recognized him. Forget the makeup. There were several other clues. Perhaps she was just too drunk. Only one way to find out, he thought. He increased their swaying and swinging and twirling. He watched as she tried to speak, to tell him to stop; however, as she opened her mouth, her eyes widened and she clamped it shut again. He ignored the first heave or two, waiting until he was certain there was no turning back. Then he let her go, aiming his release of her in the direction of the bathroom. Priss made a beeline for it.

The world was a menagerie of fireworks, drum beats and horrible sounds as Priss could not stop the violent retching. She tried to keep her hair back and out of the way of her projectile expulsions, but her coordination had evaporated with the onset of anatomical crisis.

She flushed the toilet and was about to stand when it came over her once more and she hit her knees on the tile, screaming in liquid anguish into the bowl. Her body shook with the effort and tears streamed down her face. She would never drink like this again. Ever. And, she would sure as shit kick out that asshole clown once she regained

control of herself.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of spilling her guts, Priss managed to make it to the sink, splashing cold water over her face. She was trying to clean her hair with water and a washcloth as she heard the music shift again to another angry metal type song. She was going to kill that clown, whoever he was. Why was he here? She didn't remember inviting him. Still, there was something familiar about him. And, those eyes. No, she thought. That's just your imagination.

She finished cleaning herself up and stood facing the mirror. Her hair was a mess, now mostly wet from the efforts to remove the vomit. She reached into a drawer and retrieved a small elastic band, wrapping her wet hair back into a ponytail. It would have to do for now. She adjusted her coconut bra and hula skirt, then turned and exited the bathroom.

Red waited as Priss took in the scene. He had spent his time well this evening. Thad and Misty had been secured away in the washroom off of the kitchen, safe and sound while he quietly spread the rumor that one of the neighbors had called the police. Drunken people are so very gullible, he thought. He kindly escorted most of them to the door himself, leaving only the extremely zonked out young boy in what looked to be a Cirque du Soleil outfit.

Now, the three guests of honor were sitting, facing the stereo, Indian-style with their wrists bound to their ankles with thick zip ties. Their mouths had been stuffed with silk scarves and duct-taped to prevent any arguments.

Red sprang between Misty and the Cirque boy to take Priss' hand, dragging her to the front of the assembled trio. Before she could get a grip on the seriousness of the situation, Red stuffed a scarf in her mouth and slapped more duct tape over it. He held her hands and looked into her eyes.

"Sit the fuck down. Do it nicely. Wouldn't want to mess up that gorgeous face, now would we?" His intent was clear in his duotone eyes, and she sat without further fuss. The zip tie was in place in the blink of an eye. After all, he'd been practicing for months.

He sat down in front of her and turned his head to the trio behind him. "One more than expected, but it still worked out for the best. Now, you might be thinking, due to the arrangements here, that they're your audience, right?" He saw the realization dawn in her eyes as tears seeped out and tracked the soft curve of her perfect cheeks. "Right?" he asked again.

She nodded.

"Wrong!"

She jerked back at the cold maliciousness of that one word. He leaned in, close enough that she could feel and smell his breath. Strangely, it smelled of strawberries.

"Nothing?" he asked. "The eyes didn't give it away?" He shook his head in disappointment. "Let me tell you a story, Priss. It's a story of a boy and a girl and an abiding friendship.

"This boy and girl were the closest of friends. Had been friends since second grade. So young. So ignorant. But, I digress.

"The boy was a shy little bastard. Poor. But, kind and rather smart. The girl was a shining beacon of youth and beauty with golden hair and eyes the color of a Montana

spring sky. Rich. A little spoiled. But, also kind and understanding. Or, so the boy thought.

"They would play for hours on end during the summers of their young years. He would be goofy and funny and make her laugh until she hurt. She would make him see life in the most positive of lights. Until the age of twelve. When she began hanging out with more girls her age and level of society. Then, it seemed, the boy held little interest for her. She ignored him, hoping he would just go away."

Red was really getting into the story, so much so that he was surprised to feel a tear of his own escape and track down the red and white of his makeup. He ignored it and continued to relate the story that had haunted him for all these years. He was happy to see she remembered now.

"One day, the boy felt he could no longer keep the truth inside and declared his love for the girl. Right in front of all of her new friends. The girl appeared shocked and angry, embarrassed by this boy whom she had known most of her life. With only a few words she threw him away like so much unwanted trash. Do you remember, Priss? Do you remember the words you screamed at me that day?" He saw her nod, her sobs only serving to irritate him.

"'You're nothing but a clown! I never want to see you ever again!' That was what you yelled out in front of everyone that day, Priss. You remember, don't you? Of course you do. Now. As for me, I never forgot. I never forgot a single moment I spent with you. Especially that moment when you ripped my heart from me and stomped on it for all to see.

"The last time I saw you, I just wanted to talk. I couldn't give up. Looking back, I have no idea why I tried. And, look what it got me. Sand, literally, kicked in my face. In my eye. Damage done. I still have a little sight in it. Not much. But enough. Enough to see you for what you really are." With that, he stood and pulled the box cutter from his pocket.

Priss was aghast at what was unfolding before her. If it were not for the horror of the situation she would not have believed it. Casey had always been a little strange, but she would never have thought him capable of this.

She remembered growing up with him, how sweet and kind he was. He was so shy and introverted until he got around her, and then he became every bit the class clown. He was goofy and funny and so smart. But, then he had gotten clingy, overprotective of her. They were only twelve but his growing insecurities had pushed her away from him. What he said was true. She had called him a clown in front of everyone. She had just had enough of his constant hounding of her. She had no idea it would lead to this.

She watched as he pushed up the sleeve on Thad's right arm. Thad and Misty and the boy—she thought his name was Greg—looked as if they were only barely awake, like they'd been drugged or something. Their eyes appeared to roll back in their heads every so often and then they would try and refocus on what was going on.

Priss couldn't help the tears. He had somehow gotten rid of all of her guests, so they were now on their own with him. Her heart pounded and she looked around for some way to escape.

"If you're thinking of trying to get free, I wouldn't count on it," he said, turning

back to her, catching her shifting her eyes this way and that. “Besides, the fun is just getting started.”

Red turned back to Thad who was trying to focus on him but continued to sway back and forth. Red reached out and took the man’s wrist and slid open the box cutter.

“This is your throwing arm, isn’t it, big guy?” he asked. “All those awesome games you played in high school. Some of your fondest memories, right? Hell, how could they not be? Cheerleaders hanging all over you, grades never really a problem. I mean, you were an important guy, right? How many trophies are in that high school case because of you, huh? Ah, the good old days. All those wonderful memories. Let’s make some more, shall we?”

In a movement practiced and swift, Red placed the box cutter blade against Thad’s forearm and sliced a line almost from elbow to wrist. Thad’s eyes grew wider, as if he were beginning to realize this was not some sort of hazy dream. With another smooth movement, Red sliced a line at the top and bottom of the first long cut. Priss was screaming into the scarf within her mouth behind him. He glanced back with his bloody smile and winked at her. She was sobbing breathlessly. He felt an age-old pang, but there was no turning back, now.

Reaching into his pants pocket, he retrieved a pair of thick needle-nosed pliers. Grabbing one corner of the sliced skin on Thad’s forearm, Red pulled downward, stripping the flesh from the muscle. Thad cried out and then passed out, falling over to one side in a heap, the blood oozing and flowing from his fleshless arm onto the carpet.

“Well,” Red commented, turning back towards Priss, “I would have expected more from a big, strapping guy like that. Bit of a pussy wasn’t he?”

As Priss sobbed in silence, Red wiped the box cutter blade and pliers on his red pants. He watched Priss, wondering if this was enough. No. He’d made his plan. He would follow through. What was done was done. He cleared his throat twice, to get Priss’ attention.

“He’s pretty fucked up, huh?” he asked her, nodding his head toward Thad’s crumpled, bloody body. “Should make it easy on him, right? Show some mercy?” He nodded in agreement to his own query, reached into his pocket and pulled out a shiny black and silver switchblade knife. With a click and swish, the blade snapped out, over six inches in length. Priss screamed out behind her gag, as Red lifted Thad’s head, paused only for a split second, and struck out with the switchblade and sliced the man’s jugular in one smooth movement, laying him back down on the floor to bleed out.

Red glanced back to Priss who looked as if she might pass out herself. He reached into his one shirt pocket and retrieved a small plastic encasement covered in cloth. Leaning toward Priss, he snapped the vial to release the ammonia and placed it under her nose. Her eyes flew open and her head jerked back to escape the harsh, overpowering smell.

“Let’s pay attention, shall we?” he said, placing the smelling salts back into his shirt pocket. He placed a finger under her chin bringing her eyes to meet his. “One down. Two to go.” She jerked away in revulsion, and he noticed a strong contempt in those gloriously blue eyes. It hurt him to see it, but after all these years, he now saw such contempt as simple insurance. He turned to the Playboy bunny.

“Misty,” he said to no one in particular. Then he looked back at Priss. “Was she worth it?” he asked. “Was she worth throwing away all that we had? Our friendship? The

love I had for you? Was she really worth it?" He watched as Priss shook her head violently, but he knew it was not in response to his question but in response to what she was coming.

"Head cheerleader. Beautiful girl, really. Probably doesn't deserve this, but here we go." Red ignored Priss' screams as he slid the box cutter blade up and over Misty's forehead, from one temple to the other. Misty became lucid enough to try and jerk free; blood flew out from the movement, giving her flawless complexion a dappled appearance.

Red grasped her by the back of the neck with his left hand and retrieved the pliers with his right. Misty screamed out in agony as Red dug the pliers into the cut, gripping the skin of her forehead and pulled downward. The muscle and tissue exposed, Misty struggled for a moment longer before being overwhelmed by the pain and losing consciousness. Red dropped the pliers.

"Well, now," he commented. "She did better than the barbarian, did she not?"

Priss realized that her screams were no longer audible in the least. Her throat was raw and she was breathless from her efforts. She sobbed into the gag and felt her heart break as her stomach turned. This was the most horrific thing she had ever seen. It didn't make sense. Why would Casey do this? He was literally insane. That had to be it. He was torturing her friends right in front of her. But, why? What purpose could he possibly have for his actions?

Priss blinked the tears away, noticing him moving Misty's body. He looked at her pointedly, showing her the switchblade. He was torturing these poor people and then ending their lives. Was it mercy or a simple, sadistic show performed post-desecration? She couldn't make a sound as he swiftly sliced into Misty's neck and laid her back on the carpet to die.

Priss watched him as he stared at her with those eyes of different colors. He seemed to hesitate, but then he blinked and he shifted position to sit between Misty's corpse and Greg, who had dressed as a gymnast from Cirque du Soleil. She remembered Greg, now. He was only nineteen and he was Misty's cousin. He had been well over his drinking limit and was still completely unconscious, his wrists bound to his ankles like the rest. With her eyes, she pleaded with Casey not to hurt Greg.

"Two down. One to go. Now comes the interactive part of the evening," he stated. With that, he looked over at the sleeping boy and then back to Priss. He reached down and retrieved the box cutter in his right hand and the switchblade in the other. Holding them up in front of him, he looked to each and then nodded to Priss.

Priss held her breath at the realization of what he wanted. She was to choose. On one hand was the element of torture and, on the other, swift death. She refused to play his sick little game and turned her head away to show her disgust and declination.

"Uh, uh, uh," he said, shaking his head. He held the tools up a little higher and then placed them both behind his back, making a show of shuffling them between his hands out of her sight.

Even though he probably could not understand her, she called him a sick bastard and told him to fuck off. The scarf in her mouth muffled her commentary far too much for any kind of comprehensibility and that frustrated her even more. She had already lost two friends tonight to this madman. She would not be party to the loss of a third.

"It's very simple. You choose," he said, pausing for dramatic effect, "or, I choose. And, trust me, you won't like my choice."

Priss thought about the consequences of not making the choice. If she chose wrong, Greg would be mutilated in the same manner as Misty and Thad. If she did not choose at all, the same would happen. Outside there was no sound of sirens or any sign that help was on its way. She looked at Casey, with his ridiculous makeup and bloody smile. How could things have gone so badly so quickly? It seemed that one minute they were all enjoying a friendly party and the next, people were being tortured and murdered. It was all too much for her. She wasn't certain what to do, but she knew she had to do something.

Priss nodded her head in the direction of the mad clown's right hand, hoping for the best. She felt the world slip away when he brought his hand around, into sight. He held up the box cutter. She felt light-headed and swayed from side to side. He reached into his pocket for the smelling salts, but Priss fought for lucidity. She tried to refocus on him, to see if there was any way possible to stop him before he tortured the young boy beside him. She found herself shaking the tears from her eyes. She had to be strong. Her mind ran through all sorts of scenarios, none of which proved any success in stopping this madman from killing again.

It was then that Priss stopped still, stared at Casey and realized that there was a good likelihood that she was next, after Greg, to face the mad clown's blades. She was pondering her own mutilation when he cleared his throat.

"Hold on a second while I make this call," he said, retrieving a cell phone from his pockets. She found herself wondering what he had in those bottomless pockets of his. He pressed a few buttons and then began to speak, slowly with exaggerated enunciation. It seemed it wasn't as easy to talk so clearly when you had safety pins in your cheeks. "Hello? Yes. There have been some murders. Three dead. Hurry." He gave the 911 operator the correct address and laid the phone aside, still connected to the service.

Priss stared in disbelief. Now, what the hell was he doing? He looked down at the box cutter in his hands. He looked back to her and spoke as he lifted the blade to his own face.

"It only seems fitting," he stated, the blade cutting into his cheek, edging along the outline of the red paint that exaggerated his smile. "After what I've done, I suppose I would've been a bit disappointed had you chosen the hand with the switchblade. Nothing memorable ever comes easy, right?" He continued to run the blade along the outline of his smile. As he got to his upper lip, he had to spit out the blood running into his mouth, in order to keep speaking. Priss could only stare in horror.

"You were the only one, Priss," he said through his bloody visage. "You were the only one who ever made me smile. When you said those things, it felt like I died right then and there. Maybe I did." He had completed cutting around his smile and now reached down to pick up the pliers. Priss began to shake and scream through the scarf in her mouth. He cried out in searing agony as he gripped the edge of the skin by the safety pin on his left side and pulled with all of his might.

The flesh tore away, but not wholly; there were stray strips that did not come away clean. Priss continued to scream, unable to truly believe what she had just witnessed. The pain must have been horrendous, yet Casey still sat there with his calm demeanor, a permanent bloody smile etched into his face. Bits of flesh hung haphazardly,

and drops of blood fell into his lap, mixing into the red of his clown pants. He was crying, now.

"Every moment we ever spent together," he said, the pain of speaking increased a thousand fold, "I remember like it was yesterday. You were the one good thing that I ever had in my life, Priss. You were the light at the end of my tunnel. I remember the day we met on the playground. We were only five years old, but I remember it clearly. I remember the first time we kissed, just to experiment with the idea. It was playful and embarrassing and perfect. Every one of those memories is burned into my mind and heart forever."

The pressure built in Priss' heart. She remembered those times, too. Though, perhaps, not as vividly as Casey did. She had never known how important she was to him. And, now, this. What was she to think? How was she to deal with this? Sirens screamed in the distance. It was almost over. She stared at Casey, with his bloody smile and sad clown eyes.

"I wanted you to remember me, Priss. That's all. I just wanted you to remember me." He reached for the switchblade. "And, now, you'll never forget."

The switchblade entered his neck, through his jugular and into his esophagus. He coughed out a gush of bright red, as he ripped the blade away.

Drastic Red sat motionless, staring at Priss, as his own life bled from him without a sound. Priss maintained eye contact with the bloody clown as the door burst open to shouts of the police. Her vision focused on him, narrowing down to a pinpoint on his different-colored eyes.

FUNSIZE
Jack Lloyd

Jack Lloyd started writing years back partly for his own enjoyment and partly to cope with his own inner demons. If someone can take his words and find something in them that makes them laugh, or cry or connect with in someway then that's awesome. Oh and you should be sure to thank spell/ grammar check because without it, looking at anything he wrote would seem like he took a coffee cup and smashed it against the keyboard. *Did I really spell 'spontaneously' right? Outstanding!* Jack lives in New York and when not delivering pizzas or pretending to be witty on the internet, he spends his times staring out across the ocean, doing his best to try and drown out the sound of Fate's cruel laughter with disturbing amounts of rum.

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As Halloween nights went, it was picture perfect. The wind had been picking up since sunset and the crisp air accentuated the crunch of the leaves under foot. The crowds of children scouring the neighborhoods for free goodies were better than most people had expected in light of the missing Culverton boy.

Scotty Culverton had gone missing a few weeks back. There was nothing overly mysterious about it. Normal enough family, nice kid, well liked by everyone, but one night he simply didn't come home. The police investigation turned up little as they asked the usual questions, and as it was they were leaning towards a simple runaway.

It would take more than a disappearing eight year old to keep kids inside on All Hallows Eve with the promise of free candy calling them.

Hands were clutched a little tighter and eyes paid notice to every little detail that night as parents led the littler ones around. By the time the streetlights came on the babies were inside and the ten year olds ruled the streets.

John and his younger sister, Maggie, took advantage of the lessened competition and were cleaning up on candy quite nicely. The two had already dumped the contents of their respective plastic Jack-o-lanterns into Johns backpack twice and were well on their way to a third. Being out later than the streetlights was not really a problem for the two. They had grown up learning to look after themselves more than most kids their age. Their mother passed away years ago and their father did his best on his own. He worked nights but his confidence in their inherent street smarts allowed them to stay out later for trick or treating.

Besides, how lame is Halloween in the daytime?

Maggie stopped to tie her shoe and readjust the skirt on her pirate costume, as her brother took a quick inventory in the army backpack of his soldier costume.

"Kit-kats, m&m's, peanut butter cups, um… some change, and candy corn. Blechhh, those are yours."

"Shut up doofus, those are nasty." Maggie said.

"Just like your face." John teased as he tossed a candy corn at his sister's tri-corner hat.

"Cut it out!" she yelled as she swatted at him with her sword. "How much longer are we staying out?"

Looking at his watch then taking a quick scan of the people on the streets, "Dunno, a little bit longer. I promised dad that we would be in before the streets got really empty."

John thought for a moment and detailed his plans to his sister.

It seems all kids have an Eisenhower like tactical skill deep inside them for planning out their Halloween assaults.

"Let's head up to the corner and then do the streets this side of the school. We can hit the other side of Maple Street and be back home in no time."

"Don't forget that dog on the left side about half way." Maggie reminded him.

"Right . . . we will cross sides at the Johnson's house so it doesn't start barking."

John's plan proved profitable as they passed house after house guarded by flickering pumpkins, their candy bags getting heavier with treats. It wasn't until they passed two ghosts and a werewolf, ushered by their moms, that they heard mention of the Holy Grail of Halloween, that most mythic, unattainable treat—

"I can't believe we got full size candy bars," one of the ghosts said through his bed sheet shroud.

Specifically full sized Snicker bars. Someone was giving away the Holy Grail of candy. Skipping the bite-sized nonsense and single Reeses Peanut butter cups and giving out full size candy was a sign that someone meant business.

After a quick conversation with ghost #2 the location of the house was revealed to John. He and Maggie made a bee line before the candy ran out and the hour grew late.

The house in question belonged to Barbra Rogan. Mrs. Rogan was an old lady who had been living alone for as long as kids in the neighborhood could remember.

She kept to herself most times, the exception being when she helped with bake sales for local charities.

The siblings stood on the sidewalk outside the gate to Mrs. Rogan's yard, hesitating before venturing in.

Every neighborhood has that one house that the kids pass a little quicker than others. Overactive childish energy and the need to tease one another often leads to the creation of local myths and stories. An old woman in an old house makes for a great place to dare or scare younger kids, even though there was never any reason to think anything bad about Mrs. Rogan.

These thoughts that made the kids pause before unlatching the gate. Fueled by the promise of free candy as they climbed the steps and rang Mrs. Rogan's door bell, any fear they may have had vanished as quickly as it came.

"Maybe she's asleep, old people go to bed early don't they?" Maggie asked as her brother pushed the button a second time. Before he could answer her, the door knob turned and light from inside spilled out onto the porch.

Trick or Treat!" the two said in unison to the figure in the doorway.

"Well hello children, aren't you out late?" Mrs. Rogan asked as she looked around. "And all alone too, I see."

She was quite old, but not feeble. Her slight Eastern European accent sounded strange to the kids even though her voice was kind and very grandmotherly. The siblings had no grandmother of their own and immediately took a liking to her comforting tone.

Her fine hair was a silver grey, done up in a bun and held in place with bobby pins. Small wire frame glasses were perched on her nose.

"I had expected all the children to be in for the night, I had put the treats away. Now you two stay right there."

Standing on the porch, they could see inside the woman's home. The walls were wallpapered and the foyer was lit from a small hanging chandelier. The shelves were filled with collections of random old books and knick knacks, ceramic cats and cows, vases with plastic flowers.

"Old people's houses smell." Whispered John.

"Shut up" chastised Maggie, although she did agree with her brother. The house had an odd aroma like popcorn and fresh ground pepper.

A loud crash and a yell interrupted their discussion.

"Mrs. Rogan? Are you ok?"

Maggie's concern was answered by a low groan from the other room. Opening the door, she crossed the foyer with her brother right behind her. Entering the living room they found Mrs. Rogan struggling to pull herself into the chair. Candy bars and a bowl lay on the floor near her. They helped her settle into chair as she explained what happened.

"Thank you children, I had one of the lights off and banged my leg on the ottoman. It's no worry little ones, just a fall." Mrs. Rogan rubbed one ankle as if it was sore.

"Let me get you some ice for that before it gets bad." Maggie said. "The kitchen is this way?"

"No that's alright dear, don't go in there . . ." The old woman protested, but Maggie was already down the hall. As she opened the kitchen door she let out a startled gasp, causing her brother to follow.

As the children stood in the doorway they looked on a room in direct contrast to the rest of the decor. Contrary to the drab, aged interior they had seen so far, the kitchen was bright and modern.

Stainless steel countertops lined the perimeter of the room, above white cabinets. The windowless walls were covered in white tile as was the floor and the ceiling. A long fluorescent light fixture hung over a center island, also covered with stainless steel. On the island was a variety of knives and cleavers on a cutting surface that drained into a sink. Large hooks hung from the ceiling. On the opposite wall was an oven big enough for a restaurant kitchen.

The children silently stared at the kitchen, their eyes darting from knife to hook to stove to cleaver. Their young minds desperately tried to make sense of what they were seeing. They turned toward each other, but before either could utter a word each felt a firm grasp on their shoulders as Mrs. Rogan stood behind them.

"Oh, how I wish you listened when I called you back. But come in my little morsels, you've only seen a little." Her voice cracked, her maternal kindness fading with each word spoken. The old woman's grip tightened as she shoved the two into the kitchen and released as she latched the door behind her.

The children stared in horror at the sight of her. Her hair hung to her waist in loose strands, the silver gray filled with streaks of black. The old woman's hands were claw-like now, pointed nails jutting from long fingers with bulbous joints. The once kind

bespectacled eyes were dark holes devoid of compassion. Her warm smile had been replaced by jagged teeth.

Fighting back tears Maggie asked, “Are you a witch?”

“A witch? No. but I have been called that, and worse.” Mrs. Rogan smiled and leaned close, causing the little girl to whimper and pull back. “My kind has been around for as long as yours, children, living among you. We draw little attention to ourselves and we survive. Sometimes you cattle find us out, or think you do.”

The children hugged close as the hag paced the floor, circling like a predatory animal.

“All those poor women burned as witches in Salem, not a one of them was one of my kin. Superstitious fools. I was there, laughing inside as those stupid cunts roasted alive. Fire burns me just as them, but I never saw the flame in Massachusetts.”

She let out a laugh that chilled the kids to their core.

“I have been alive for a long, long time. Long before I moved here. And I stay alive by being smart. All you kiddies parading up to my door, each one more delicious than the last.”

She touched John’s cheek and then licked it as if to taste him. “To be sure I wouldn’t be overcome with hunger and took the time to create a proper meal, I had a snack. A young man named Scotty. Was he a classmate of yours? If so, he’ll no longer be attending school . . . and neither will you. I didn’t need this attention I didn’t need you little fuckers poking around in my house, and now I need to fix the situation.”

She grabbed a meat cleaver and lurched towards them, causing Maggie to burst into tears.

“Oh wait,” she said, “What am I thinking? I forgot to pre-heat.”

Setting down the cleaver, the hag turned and limped toward the oven, and John assumed her injured ankle existed in this form as well.

“Be ready to run ok.” John said trying to sound brave for his sister.

“What? What are you going to do?”

“Fire. Remember what she said? Fire can kill her. When she goes to the stove that’s our chance. Just run when I tell you.”

John’s instructions were cut short by the sound of the oven door opening. He pushed his sister towards the door and charged the hag, knocking her headfirst into the oven. Shouting over her muffled screams, John told his sister to run.

Maggie fumbled at the latch and swung the door open, and she and her brother raced to the front door. The door opened and they only got a single breath of cool night air before it slammed shut again.

The smell of burnt skin and singed hair filled their noses and they felt cold claws around their necks. They were lifted easily, their feet dangling as they were turned to face the hag.

“I don’t know about you children, but I find an electric oven bakes much more evenly. Tell me what *you* think.”

Mrs. Rogan’s laughter echoed off the walls as she carried them back to the kitchen.

CHALDON'S BONES
Robert S. Wilson

Robert S. Wilson was born in Bloomington, Indiana during the blizzard of '78. His first taste for horror came from watching episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and the stories his mother told him of a supposedly haunted house his family once lived in. He is the author of *Shining in Crimson*, book one of his dystopian vampire series: *Empire of Blood*. His novella, *The Quiet*, appeared in the anthology *Not in the Brochure: Stories of a Disappointing Apocalypse*. He is currently working on book two of the *Empire of Blood* series and is co-editing the anthology, *Horror for Good: A Charitable Anthology*. Robert lives in Middle Tennessee with his wife and two kids and spends most of his time wondering where all the time went.

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Halloween was my favorite night of the year until the fall of '96. I hadn't seen my buddy Jeremy in over a year when he called me that afternoon. He said he had a night of horror all planned out for us. He showed up that night around 9 in an old black boxy van with two guys I'd never seen before.

One was short, heavy set with blond hair down to his chin and a blond beard, and kind of resembled Chris Farley. The other guy had long red hair pulled back into a pony tail, was dressed all in leather, and I found myself unable at first to look away from the black teeth behind his impish smile. Both of them looked like they hadn't showered in weeks.

Jeremy slid open the side door of the van and jumped out straight for me. He gave me one of those hip backwards handshakes that look more like you're arm wrestling. "Hey, duder, come meet the guys. This is Rick..."

"Hey," the Chris Farley look-a-like said.

"...and this is Darrell."

"What's up, man?" The impish smile grew and even more black teeth showed.

"Hey guys, nice to meet you. What the hell's going on, Jer?"

"Get your shit and get in the van and you'll find out, bro."

Once I got my smokes and my wallet, I climbed into the side of the van and sat down behind the bucket seats on the floor next to Jeremy. Jeremy reached across, slid the door shut, and the van peeled out of my gravel driveway.

As the van shook us around, Jeremy opened up a blue cooler sitting on his other side, pulled out 2 Budweisers, and handed me one. We clinked the necks of the bottles together and Jeremy said his toast.

"To a horrible, frightening night with good friends."

Rick Farley howled like a wolf as Captain Black Teeth beat his fists against the dash. Jeremy and I guzzled our beers. I couldn't see much out the windshield, but I could see enough trees to realize we weren't going into town. Instead, we ventured deeper and deeper into the wooded countryside. A few more beers and scary shows of excitement from Jeremy's other friends and we arrived at our first destination.

I stepped from the van, my feet crunching in gravel, and noticed the house at once. It was huge and obviously abandoned. It seemed to hover over us, its second floor windows

narrow and watching, waiting for us to come closer. Its once-white paint was now completely faded and flaking and the porch had sunken in some years ago. I've never had a stronger feeling of dread toward an inanimate object. Rick took the lead, waving us to follow. Darrell went next, and Jeremy and I followed.

"They call this The House of Bones," Rick said.

Darrell called ahead to Rick, "What the hell for?"

"How the hell should I know? Hey, maybe there's some bodies in here," he said stopping and looking back at us with an exaggerated sadistic expression. He laughed and turned back toward the house.

Fenced-in fields of neatly rowed, dark yellow corn stalks surrounded both sides of the huge yard. The darkness between those rows of corn gave me chills as I kept imagining movement within them from the corner of my eyes. Even as dark as it was, brightly colored leaves of yellow, brown, and orange covered the ground demanding our attention as we walked toward the house.

Rick stepped onto what was left of the porch. The movement of shadows on the wall of the house gripped and squeezed my heart. The tall outline of a man with long thin arms turned out only to be the shadow of a tree. I took a deep breath and let it out quietly so the guys wouldn't think I was a pussy.

"Oh, wow. That's so fuckin' cool!" Rick said as he stepped into the partially open door. I stepped experimentally onto the porch and leaned a little to try and see what Rick thought was so great.

Stepping from one board to another like stepping on stones in a creek, I made my way up to the front door.

"Oh that *is* pretty killer, man," Jeremy said.

Rick held a flashlight over his head and pointed downward. The beam illuminated a large rundown piano covered in several layers of dust. He ran his other hand down the keys and various out-of-key notes played. A bunch of the keys were cracked or busted.

When I stepped into the house, I noticed a large Victorian stairway behind Rick. I pointed to it. "What's upstairs?"

Rick laughed and said, "Let's go see, man."

So, we followed Rick up the stairs. About half of the steps were caved in and the other half felt like a thick cardboard. All along the walls were drawings and writing I couldn't quite make out with the little bit of bouncing light coming back from Rick's flashlight.

When we were all at the top of the stairs, we came to a huge bedroom just to the left. Inside, things were scattered everywhere. A bed lay at the end of the room, its mattress and box springs pulled from the base and sprawled out along side it. A dresser lay on its side in the middle of the room and clothes and blankets covered the entire floor.

Rick shined the flashlight on the walls. "What's that?"

Writing like I had just seen going up the stairs covered the entire wall. Each small section had different handwriting. Some of them were marked with dates and years.

Jimmy was here and he fucked your mom in this room! February 12th 1962

If you're reading this it's already too late... Trevor May 1976

For a good time you won't forget, call Jannette 765-653-2997

Whatever you do, don't go digging up Chaldon's bones! - Leonard January 1944

We stood there reading writings on the wall for several minutes before we decided to

move on. The rest of the upstairs didn't seem nearly as interesting to us. A collective uneasiness was coming over us by that time and it wasn't long before we were stepping right back through that front door. But Ricky wasn't ready to leave quite yet. When Jeremy and I stepped outside, the two other guys were nowhere to be seen.

We circled around looking for where they might have gone. The van looked lonely sitting in the long gravel driveway with the moon morphed into a halo of clouds hanging over it. Rick's voice called out from behind the house and echoed off a huge old barn across the street.

"Hey, guys you're missing it. This is fucking awesome."

Jeremy and I walked toward the side of the house, following Rick's ricocheting voice. As we came around the corner, a loud yell came from the shadows. We both jumped and I let out a near scream as Darrell jumped out at us.

"You fuckin' prick, you scared the shit out of us," Jeremy yelled.

Darrell laughed hysterically, his impish grin arching up the sides of his face.

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it as he continued to chuckle. As Jeremy and I followed suit to do the same, a loud gargled scream came from behind the house. Darrell laughed harder and Jeremy looked at me and smiled. "You're gonna have to try a lot fucking harder than that, Ricky, you son of a bitch!"

There was no reply.

Jeremy only laughed. I kept hearing that scream repeat in my head, my brain analyzing it over and over for humor.

"Well, I'm gonna go see what he's up to," I said.

"Okay, have fun and don't shit your pants when he grabs hold of your ankle or some shit," Jeremy said.

I laughed nervously and then started walking toward the back of the house as Jeremy and Darrell chattered back and forth.

As I came closer and closer to the back corner of the house, a dim red glow crept through a thin veil of mist covering the back yard. I stopped and looked at the glow. My legs stiffened involuntarily. I was just about to turn back when a loud racket like the sound of things being thrown around in a small room started from behind the house. I managed to make my feet lift off the ground one after another until I came around the back corner of the house.

A small, wood-rotted outhouse stood shaking at the center of about a dozen dead trees, the red glow coming out from between the cracks of the door and in between each heavily weathered board. If Rick was playing a joke on me, he sure as hell worked hard on it. I yelled back to the guys and then in a blinding flash of that same hue of red, the glow disappeared and the outhouse settled still.

Jeremy and Darrell arrived just in time to see nothing out of the ordinary. The door opened with a loud creak and Rick wandered out with his hair disheveled and a confused look on his face.

"Guys, what the hell happened?"

Jeremy and Darrell busted out in laughter.

"Did you fall in again, Ricky?" Darrell asked.

Rick's face changed at once and he was laughing along with the other guys. I stood stone-still watching his every move, unable to shake what I had just seen from my memory.

"Darrell, you asshole, you know I'm too goddamn fat to fall into a toilet. I must've hit my head in there though. It hurts real fucking bad."

"Sure it does man. That's probably the beer talking. What do you say, man? You ready for destination number two?" Darrell asked and dragged on the tiny butt of his cigarette, the same grin from earlier still covering his face.

"Hell yeah, dude. Let's go."

The guys started walking back toward the van and I was forced to make a decision right then. Either follow and keep what I saw to myself or say something and deal with the blowback. My analytical side still unable to believe it was real won over, telling me I'd only be the butt of their jokes for the rest of the night. So, I followed them back to the van and we headed out.

About 45 minutes later, heading south of Cloverdale on US 231, they still hadn't told me where we were going. Not long afterward, we came to the junction for Highway 42. Rick swerved the van to the right, causing the yellow flashers of the traffic light to stream in the corner of my eyes. Just like that, the last signs of town were replaced with wooded, leaf-covered land marked with an occasional house or cornfield.

No matter how many times I've been down that way--and it's been many--the place never fails to give me the utter willies. Especially in autumn. The tall trees huddle over the land, their branches like bony hands reaching down to pluck the occasional unsuspecting victim from the road. The blackness between them hiding endless unimaginable terrors watching and waiting.

After traversing at least a dozen hills and curves, we arrived at the familiar entrance to the Lieber State Park camping grounds. Unsurprising to me, the gate was closed and the small ranger station stood completely unlit save for the solitary burglar light from above.

Rick smacked the top of his steering wheel. "Ah, fuck. I should've known they'd be closed for Halloween."

We sat there in the van staring at the yellow-tinted woods beyond the gate.

Darrell interrupted the silence, "Well, I guess we could go to my place, instead."

"No, no, no, wait a minute. I know a way in," Rick said with a sly smile on his lips. Then, he shifted into reverse and peeled out back onto the main road. He hummed something I'd never heard before as he turned into smaller and smaller back roads until we finally ended up on a small dirt road. After a few minutes, the dirt road forked off to the left up a hill with large stones surrounding it. He pulled up onto the hill, the van gunning almost straight upward, throwing Jeremy and I on our backs.

Then the van fell back to level ground with a loud thud and Rick swerved and stopped, pushing all of us forward with inertia. He put the van in park and said, "Well, here we are. Told you guys I knew a way in."

Not having any way of knowing whether we were really in the park or not, I held my tongue. We got out of the van, and before us, the small island of a hill was as nice of a camping spot as any you would find in the park either way. The sound of rushing water in the distance kept complete silence at bay.

Before long, we sat and drank beers around the campfire Rick and Darrell had started. Half a dozen beers apiece later, we popped open the cooler and pulled out the package of hot dogs and started cooking them over the fire.

In between sloppy bites from his hotdog, Darrell bragged about the different girls he

had slept with. I couldn't help wondering what kind of girl would sleep with him as those black teeth ground away at his food. I got up and walked out into the woods to take a piss, Darrell's tall tale fading in the background as I went. I caught myself leaning a little as I stared up at the star-strewn sky while my piss continued to stream aimlessly.

There was a rustling beyond the trees and I nearly peed all over myself as I hustled to close up my pants. I held my breath as I squinted in the direction of the sound. I could see nothing but the phantom licks of flame the campfire had burned into my vision. Then, as the pale glow of it faded, I could see movement and I became still as an icy sensation crept up my back.

The movement stopped suddenly and I felt the air thicken around me. Then, a small white rabbit hopped away from the spot and I exhaled the breath I'd been holding. Goddamn you, Peter Cottontail, I thought. I turned and went back toward the campfire. When I got back, the guys were passing around a joint and I sat next to Jeremy with unease.

Darrell stood up and reached over the fire to hand me the joint and before I could make my usual gesture, Jeremy took hold of it.

"Bob's more of a drinker, man."

Darrell looked at me suspiciously.

"It's cool, man. He's not gonna call the police or anything."

Darrell nodded and smiled with that impish grin again.

"Damn right, he won't. I'd kill him if he did," he said and laughed. The other two joined him and I did my best to smile. If Jeremy wasn't concerned, I would try my best to shake it off.

When the joint was finished. Jeremy climbed into the back of the van and lay down, leaving me in what, I felt, might at any moment turn into a scene from Deliverance. I calmed my nerves with another beer and Darrell and Rick lit up another toke. After a few rounds, the joint came back to Rick and he stood with it in his teeth and started dancing around the fire. The light of the fire and the look in his eyes as he stomped around saying, "Master, oh Master, oh Master of Power," made him look even more like a crazed Chris Farley. His conjuring dance increased in its excitement to the point that Darrell was getting annoyed.

"All right, Rick. It's time to settle it down, man. Jeremy's over there trying to get some sleep and I'm about to do the same."

Rick's chanting only grew louder.

"Master, oh Master, oh Master of Power, I summon thee!" His voice echoed back from the forest.

Darrell, still smiling like a gremlin at Christmas, got up and made a calming gesture with his arms. "Now, Rick, don't make me have to bust a bottle over your head," he said and looked at me, laughing. No sooner had he turned to look back at Rick that the deranged Farley look-a-like reached out, grabbed him, and spun him around so he faced back to me. Darrell laughed with a mix of annoyance and drunkenness as Rick embraced him with one arm.

"Come on, Ricky-boy, I think you've just about had one too many--" Rick reached up with a knife in his other hand and slit a deep gash in Darrell's throat. Darrell's voice cut off in a dreadful, gargling sound as his face stuck somewhere between the usual grin and a grimace of terrible realization.

I staggered back as Rick leaned Darrell's body over the fire, leaking the blood from his throat onto the flame with a loud crisp sizzle. Behind Darrell's twitching body, I could see that familiar glow from the old outhouse coming from Rick's eyes and mouth. A red mist began rising from the fire and then swirled up into a huge, indefinite shape. I jumped up into the back of the van and shook my sleeping buddy and yelled, "Jeremy! Jeremy, wake up!" He groaned with annoyance in reply.

Behind me, I felt an ominous presence growing. I looked back to see the red mist now swirling around Rick's body and connecting with the red light coming from his face. His body rose from the ground looking like the lost footage from some wacked out B-movie starring Chris Farley as a hell-raising demon.

Jeremy finally opened his eyes. He squinted at the red chaos behind me and then his eyes shot open wide like silver dollars. "Holy shit!"

We ran toward the front of the van, pulling the doors shut as we went. That eerie red glow was coming in through the foggy back windows. Jeremy jumped into the driver seat and looked around for the keys that we both knew were probably still in Rick's pants pocket. Then, the van started to shake. We both grabbed hold of whatever we could to try and hold ourselves still. The shaking only increased until the van was rocking.

My stomach dropped sideways as the van began to tip just enough to almost fall over. It came back down on all four wheels with a slam and then began to tip the other way. My stomach fell again and before I could focus to try and calm myself, the van fell on its side with a crash of glass and metal hitting solid ground.

I slammed into the new floor of the van landing on my back as Jeremy came flying down, right shoulder and head first. I barely registered the crack when he landed as reality faded.

When I came to, the van was shaking again. I pulled myself up and steadied my balance with the now sideways bucket seat and knelt down to take a look at Jeremy. He lay crumpled upside down against the passenger seat and cast in that red glow. He was unconscious, but when I put my hand in front of his mouth I could feel his warm breath contrast with the cool dry autumn air.

It was only as it started to return that I realized my hearing must have subsided for a short period of time. That was when I heard the wind. It sounded like a hurricane was just outside the van. The shaking came back full force.

I was afraid to move my friend in his current position but I also knew I couldn't leave him in this situation. I carefully pulled him up, relieved that he was light enough I could do so. Then, I stepped up onto the side of the bucket seat and pushed my way up toward the driver side door. I knew it would be too difficult to open it, so I began turning the crank for the window instead.

As the window opened, the sheer volume of the wind drowned out what little hearing I still had. I pushed Jeremy up and out the window, careful to set him on the side of the still-shaking van. I saw his body half roll back and forth as I pulled myself up until I was sitting inside the open window.

A huge red vortex was rising up to the sky from behind the van and Rick was nowhere to be seen. Now I knew where the wind came from.

I pulled my legs out from inside the van, crossed the window, and sat back down to where my legs hung over the bottom of the van. I then reached over and pulled Jeremy by the arms as I jumped down. Going first and pulling him with me, I aimed so I would

break his fall. It hurt like hell, but I knew he would've done the same for me.

When I got out from under Jeremy and looked up at the sky, my breath stopped in my chest for a moment. The red mist was spreading up the vortex, into the sky, and out toward the horizons like red wine spilling upward into the atmosphere. I caught my breath and leaned down, pulling Jeremy's body over my shoulders. Then, I ran for the edge of the hill, slid down onto the dirt road, and started to run.

Beyond the dirt road, I came into a thick forest. When I couldn't run any farther, I stopped and set Jeremy down and collapsed onto the ground, breathing rapidly. The red mist was now taking up a large portion of the sky. I couldn't help but feel like that might be a bad sign for a lot of people. I had mostly caught my breath by the time I made my decision. I only hoped that Jeremy would be safe.

I did my best to hide him before I left him there. Then, I made my way back toward the hill. I had gained enough momentum from running that it didn't take much extra effort to get myself up onto it. I watched the swirling cylinder of red from behind the van, that deafening wind blowing everything away from it.

I had no clue what the hell I could possibly do to stop what was going on, but I knew I had to try something. I pushed against the wind in the direction of the vortex. The closer I came to the back of the van, the harder it was to move. I could see that it seemed to be coming directly from the fire. As I came around from the side of the overturned van, I saw the cooler backed against one of the large gray rocks that crown the hill.

I knew then what I hoped might work. I threw my body against the blasting air coming from the red swirling whirlwind. The air seemed to stiffen as I realized whatever it was knew I was there and what I had planned to do. A red outline of Rick appeared in the base of the vortex and spoke to me.

"Go away or die," it said in an echoing thunder. I pushed on anyway, trying to ignore the figure as it pulled from the vortex. I was only mere feet from the cooler when it reached out and grabbed my shoulder, its hand burning through my clothes and searing my flesh.

I screamed and tried to jerk away, but the wind pushed me back. I was near to fainting when the pain simply subsided and my mind went blank for a split second. Then, I saw flashes of... something.

At first I didn't know what it was, but before long, they became more complete. It was this very spot. But it wasn't at all like now. The gray rocks formed the bottom of a stone cylinder pointing up to the sky. Inside, a light brown-skinned man dressed in strips of leather and feathers clutched a long thick, whittled tree branch and screamed up at the sky as flames engulfed the lower half of his body. Somehow, I knew then he was a powerful medicine man.

Outside of the stone cylinder, a number of other Native Americans danced around the circular stone building chanting and waving their spears into the air. The medicine man's screaming became a horrible, corroding sound. As if his screams were being melted down by the fire. Then all but that bottom layer of gray rocks remained and Red Rick's hand was burning into my shoulder again. I could feel the flesh beginning to give way. I screamed and jerked myself forward, stumbling to the ground and reaching out for the cooler. Rick screamed, "No!" as my fingers clasped around the edge of the white plastic handle of the cooler.

Leaves and rocks flung at me from all directions as I pulled the cooler to me with all

of my might. Rick reached out and grabbed my ankle with his burning red hand. I felt the thin flesh melt around it and I had to fight with everything I had to stay conscious. I pulled backward then, bringing the cooler with me and thumped it against Rick's head. He fell backwards with that familiar Farley clumsiness and the red vortex began to widen toward me.

I jumped up with a force I didn't know I had and simultaneously flung open the cooler. The half-melted ice spilled onto the red fire coming out of the ground where our meager campfire had been. A great explosion of red mist scattered dirt, rocks, and steaming embers everywhere. I watched as all of the mist including what had spread into the sky simply dissipated. Immediately afterward, Rick crumpled to the ground and lay still, his eyes staring into eternal depths that no living man would ever see.

Some time later, after years of digging up old documents, I learned something interesting about that old house out in the woods. The original owner of the land had been Lester Chaldon, a wealthy eccentric businessman.

It was mostly kept quiet, but I found out by reading old letters between his brother and sister that he had a thing for collecting the old bones of Indian medicine men. It was also said that he tended to bury them throughout the yard. He believed he was using them to put a curse on anyone who would trespass into his land.

I can't help but wonder where he got the idea.

MOON DANCE
Matthew J. Leverton

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Jimmy lay on the ground, staring at the flickering stars in the infinite distance. He grasped in his right hand a small folded paper. He sighed into the night and said, "Are *you* going?"

Felicia lay just a few feet away, her long red hair splayed out behind her like a copper blood stain. "I'm thinking about it. Stacey Kell's parties are always wild. You never know, it may be an all out orgy this year." Felicia giggled.

"Really?" Jimmy said, perking up.

"No, you pervert! It's normally a costume ball. I went a few years ago, and they had about a hundred people all dressed in cloaks and masks. It was kind of creepy and really fun." Felicia smiled. She ran her hands over her hair and the grass.

"I'm thinking about going…" Jimmy said, waiting for the moment Felicia would make fun of him.

"I think that'd be awesome. I mean, you *were* invited, so I guess she may want you there. She doesn't invite everyone."

Jimmy smiled. His gaze never left the sky that night, a rather large, lovesick smile took shape where his mouth was. Felicia didn't look over to him, she knew he was happy, and she'd keep him that way.

The moon illuminated the sky in a sickly white glow. The sloping field beneath alight with three bonfires amongst an overcrowded forest of green trees. In the distance, figures danced, their cloaks flapping in the breeze and Jimmy could hear the giggles and cries of the party. Jimmy stood on the balcony of the Kell Estate, watching the party below.

Several people surrounded him, dressed not unlike the party-goers below; black cloaks and golden masks with rather phallic noses and slit eyes. Jimmy rubbed his arms as a breeze blew through his cloak. Felicia was somewhere, to that he was certain. He could not see her amongst the crowd in her garish green cloak and silver mask, but he could be sure she was around.

"Having fun," a pleasant voice said from behind him. Jimmy turned around and was greeted with astounding blue eyes behind a simple white face mask. Her face looked frozen in time; emotionless. Long, curly blonde hair flowed out behind the mask.

"Uh-yeah, I guess," he spoke softly.

"You guess? You're at one of the biggest parties of the year, and *you guess* you're having fun?" She smiled; Jimmy couldn't see her mouth but the way her eyes thinned into slits he could tell she was.

"Well, maybe someone should show me what fun is, at these parties." He had no control over what left his mouth, just felt the immediate regret that he had said such a forward thing to a probable complete stranger.

She stepped closer, still smiling. The people around them left for the party below and they stood alone. “What exactly is *fun* to you?”

Jimmy quivered, he felt a pull in his gut and his loins, but felt the shame equally. Jimmy stammered and then said, “I don’t know.” He didn’t know, that was the damnable thing about it.

The girl in the white mask laughed, she raised a hand to his cheek and touched him. Her touch was warm and inviting. His head spun at that instant, feeling a girl’s hand against his skin was more than he ever handled before. “Well, let me show you,” she whispered.

Jimmy’s body tingled, but he looked around to see who was watching him. His eyes scanned for Felicia, but again, she was nowhere to be found. The party had moved downstairs, people dancing amidst the fire’s glow. Their shadows dancing against the trees. “What about Stacey?”

The girl looked at him, unblinking. “What about Stacey?”

“I kinda came here to see her.” Jimmy sighed, feeling foolish.

“Oh. I’m sorry, then.” The girl dropped her chin and curtsied. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

She had gotten a few steps away from him, when he grabbed her hand. He had no idea what he was doing or why he was doing it, other than he was at the mercy of the moment. She turned back and locked eyes with him.

“Plans change.” He smiled.

She smiled too, “So they do.”

Felicia danced around the fire, whipping her long green cloak. The flames licked at the flinging cloth. She whooped as her hips moved with the music, swinging her hair around as well. To everyone there, she looked like a dancing fire nymph, slinging flames as she moved. Many of the men watched this dance, her eyes meeting with many of them. She flung her cloak again, this time revealing she was wearing very little underneath. Her breasts and sex were covered by a thin layer of leather underwear. She had her intentions for the night, and was set on getting it. A few of the other female party-goers groan in disgust at the sight, shouting obscenities at the dancing nymph. A few others joined her in a rather seductive dance. The ladies danced against the flames, casting exaggerated shadows upon the illuminated ground. Many men tried to hide their interest, but it was impossible, they drew ever closer.

Jimmy walked through the party with the girl at his wrist; she was leading him into the woods. His face burned from a mixture of embarrassment and the intense heat of the pyres. The girl walked quickly, determined.

“Where are we going?”

The girl stopped long enough to turn around, move her mask up a little and kiss Jimmy.

Jimmy’s head spun as if he were intoxicated. The askewed faces of the party-goers, the flickering flames, all spun into a kaleidoscope of images. His feet were moving again before he snapped back to reality. Again they were moving, now further from the party. The air became crisp and cool as they stepped closer into the darkness.

“I-I don’t even know your name.”

"Anna." She came to a stop just behind another line of trees. She stepped over to a stump and sat down.

The party could still be seen not far off. Women were dancing provocatively and Jimmy couldn't care less. He turned his attention to the sitting maiden. "Anna? I like that. I'm-"

"Jimmy," Anna said. "I know your name, I know you in fact."

"How?"

"Does it matter? Or does it matter more that I want you?"

Jimmy's eyes widened as she said she wanted him. He felt his body quivering in anticipation.

"Do you want me?" Anna said, leaning back a little against the stump.

"Yes." Jimmy rasped.

Anna giggled. "Why did you really come out here, Jimmy?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Your real reason for coming out here with me; did you think you were going to get laid?"

Jimmy shook his head, "I just wanted to take the chance and spend some time with someone other than my friends tonight. You captured my attention."

Anna nodded. Her mask looked grotesque under the moonlight; her eyes had become black, lifeless sockets that stared deep into him. "Stacey always throws these parties. Tonight's a special occasion. The Full Moon Gala."

"What is that?" Jimmy knelt down before Anna, his hands slowly creeping to touch her leg. His stomach quivered as he did so, almost making him rethink his move.

"Well, it's no mystery that hundreds of years ago the Kell family had a supposed "witch" in their family. People ostracized her and cast her out of the town. She lived here, in the manor. Every full moon she'd have a ritual where she'd dance naked under the moon, cleansing herself for a new beginning. Every full moon."

"You're kidding," Jimmy said, sitting back. "I don't believe that. Witches aren't real. Aren't they a little too Halloween for us?" Jimmy laughed.

"Actually, witches follow nature. There is no demon worship or bloodletting of virgin children. It's just a belief to readmit you to the earth and be cleansed." Anna sat up straight and grasped the front of Jimmy's cloak and pulled him close. "Do you want to see me dance?" she whispered in his ear.

"Y-Yes."

Anna got to her feet and removed her cloak. She wore a shirt and pants underneath, and she slowly lifted her shirt revealing her stomach. She stopped, "You know it's not fair you're seeing me without me seeing you."

"I can't." Jimmy looked around. "What if someone sees me?"

Anna lifted her shirt a little higher exposing the bottom of her bra covered breasts. "Please?"

Jimmy got to his feet and removed his cloak. As he did, Anna removed her shirt and began to remove her pants. He did the same, stopping only for a moment to feel the bitter cool chill across his bare skin. Anna stood in her panties and bra, still wearing her mask.

"Can I see your face?" Jimmy asked.

"No. I like it like this. We can still be mysterious. Besides, what if you don't like

my face?" She didn't give him time to answer before she unsnapped her bra and it fell to the grass. Her breasts were not big, a high B, but Jimmy was paying full attention to them. He wanted to reach out and touch her, and stepped forward. "No," she said. "Lose the boxers."

Jimmy looked down and realized his boxers were still on, and they were scarcely holding him back as he grew hard. He hesitated for a moment, thumbed the band and dropped them, exposing himself to Anna and the moon light. He waited for her to start laughing or for this all to be a great practical joke on him. Ha ha! Get the geeky kid naked and beat him senseless.

Nothing happened. Anna did not laugh at him. No one came out with a camera to film this moment. Instead, she followed suit and dropped her panties. Jimmy took a moment feasting his eyes on her body; this was the closest he'd ever been to a real naked woman before. His hands reached out for her, he wanted to touch her soft flesh and hold her close. His hormones were racing and his erection was hard as a rock. "Anna, you're so beautiful."

"Ha, you're just saying that because you're horny and you know that I want you." She stepped backward, into the moon light. She began to rock her hips as she danced in circles. "Come on! Dance with me!"

Jimmy took one look around before joining her. So what, if anyone saw him he still had his mask on, so did she. Besides, there was so much more happening at the party. He looked over for a second and a gathering around the fire told him the party was getting a little heavy. He turned back to Anna who was motioning him to come forward. His erection was subsiding due to the cold and her body prickled with gooseflesh.

He danced closer to her, they were mere feet apart. "So do you get a lot of guys naked and dancing with you?"

Anna said, "More than you'd think. But usually it's in reverse. They dance then I get them naked." She laughed as she stepped closer to Jimmy. He could feel the faint warmth of her body as they were almost touching. He stopped dancing, and instead she placed her hands on his stomach making it visibly quiver and suck in. She took long steps around him, her hands never leaving his flesh. She was all around him, and the scent of her skin began to overthrow his senses as she danced. His eyes closed and rolled into the back of his head.

"Oh God," he spoke as her touch tickled his skin making him grow hot.

"Shh…" she whispered as she circled him again and then stopped in front of him. His eyes remained closed and she moved her mask aside and pressed her lips to his. Her lips caressed his and he felt her tongue slowly slide into his mouth. He wrapped his arms around her and could feel her against him. She was cold but her mouth was hot. He began to feel himself grow again, and he tried to hide it, but was unsuccessful.

"Jeez, persistent isn't he?" Anna shook her head.

"I'm sorry. In fact," Jimmy opened his eyes and said, "I have never actually done this before."

"Danced in the moonlight?"

"No, what I think we're about to do. Well, I hope what we're going to do."

Anna placed her finger over Jimmy's lips and nodded. Relaxing warmth overtook him. She took his hand and laid him on the ground. "I want this as much as you do."

Jimmy placed his hands on her arms as she knelt before him. She kissed her way

down his stomach and then took him into her mouth. He exhaled in ecstasy as she did this. Jimmy moaned as she continued, never feeling anything like this before.

"Do you like that?" She stopped long enough to ask.

"Y-Yes."

Anna stood up and Jimmy watched her as she lowered herself on top of him, and he then felt the true warmth of her body. She moaned as she slid down, and then began rocking back and forth. She ran her hands up her body, rubbing her breasts and then finally running her hands through her hair. She began to moan as then pant. "Aren't you glad we cleansed ourselves? God this is such a sin." She snickered as she continued to make love.

"A sin, that feels so good." Jimmy said in between moans.

The ground was cool and wet, but Jimmy didn't mind as he was growing warm. The ground seemed to hug his body. His senses were completely blown away with Anna making love to him, the smell of the earth beneath him and the smoldering fire in the distance.

Anna's breath became more erratic, her hips bucked with the passion and finally she climaxed with a hard thrust; her muscles squeezing Jimmy as she did. She bucked again, climaxing again and as she did this she ripped aside her mask and kissed his mouth hard. Jimmy kissed back, their tongues twirling and dancing together as their owners did just a short while ago.

Anna was not letting up. Her kiss was getting deeper, the ground hugging him more, her struggled to move his arms, but they were planted. The earth was embracing them. Jimmy went to scream into Anna's mouth but she only kissed harder. He rocked against her but she only kept her pressure on him. Their bodies comingled into the earth as it drew them in.

Anna broke the kiss and looked down at Jimmy. Jimmy let out a terrified scream that fell short of the orgasmic moans from around the fire just a few hundred feet away. "Help me," he cried. He turned his gaze up to Anna and began to weep. "Please, help me."

Anna kissed his lips again; again he screamed. She held her kiss until he stopped screaming a minute later. Her legs were planted too, but with a little effort she raised her foot out of the shallow. She wiped her lips and then stared at the spot where Jimmy was just moments before.

"I give you this, Mother. In return, you feed on this pure heart. Heal yourself, so one day you can be as strong as you once were." Anna kissed her hand and then touched the earth.

Anna gathered her clothes and began to walk back to the party. She pulled her cloak back on over her naked body and adjusted the mask. Stacey was in a compromising position in front of the fire, a man was behind her thrusting, and she was face down moaning just a few feet from the flickering. Stacey's mere acts of fornication belittled everything the tradition stood for. Her party guests slammed into each other like grotesque beasts with human flesh. The dank sweat and sex odor assaulted from all sides, compounded by the intense heat of the fading pyres.

"Anna! Get out of here, before Mom and Dad kill me!" Stacey yelled, still in the throes of passion.

"Sorry, Stacey." Anna said as she scurried into the house. Anna did not look up

again until she was inside the house, from there she watched where the party was, and occasionally glanced in the distance where Jimmy and her consummated.

A faint smile crossed her lips, she would miss him.

EDDY
H.H. Shullith

Preferring to talk to animals and not people, H.H. Shullith lives in a bohemian loft in the northwest, where she writes novels and delights in showing visitors her collection of fully functional diesel-powered chain-driven sex toys.

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Lomax was a prosecutor for Multnomah County and the terror of the city of Portland until he found his true calling. Time after time the conservative, capitalistic and callous Benson Lomax would swoop into a courtroom and somehow convince a mostly Democratic, extremely liberal jury plucked from liberal enclaves like Hawthorne or Multnomah Village that the accused was dangerous, unrepentant and a risk to public safety and had to be locked away. He won almost every case and took great delight in the fact that he was known in the public defender's office as *the ballcrusher*.

Lomax didn't care about anything but money and power and what they bought him; property, prestige and pussy. It wasn't until he was forced to appear at a benefit for special needs foster children that he realized how empty his life was and what good he could still do with the years he had left. He never dwelled on his sudden conversion, and didn't attribute it to conscience or God. He tried not to think about it, afraid he might jinx the joy he found in his new life.

Lomax retired. He cashed in his chips and bought a huge spread in Montana. Once a working ranch, the Big Sky Estate became a haven for foster children who could not fit in anywhere else, children who had been shunned, locked up, and abused.

Lomax was once razor sharp and whippet thin, as keen and dangerous as a honed blade, and just as heartless.

Lomax was older now. He was fatter, gentler, easy to laugh, full of love and fiercely protective of the six children who were now *his* children.

Lomax had lost his edge . . . at a time when that edge was needed most.

"You sure you got the right fuckin road?" Brenda was in the back seat of the old Chevy, behind Patty, who was driving.

"I'm sure," Patty said. She was usually too timid for Brenda's taste but she knew how to handle a car. Driving was why she had been locked up. She drove getaway for a boyfriend with two bad habits; a meth addiction and a compulsion to rob banks. The fact that the dumb shit panicked on their last job and shot an off-duty cop who tried to defuse a tense situation didn't help. Patty had expected to spend the rest of her life in prison thanks to Benson Lomax, a horrible man who had seemed to enjoy ruining her life, until her sentence was reduced on a legal technicality from homicide to attempted robbery, with time served. She had gone into prison at nineteen, and had turned twenty-three the day she was released.

Brenda looked at Liz, who sat across from Patty in the driver's seat. "You sure you know how to read a fuckin map?"

"Don't be such a bitch," Liz said. Liz was tiny and lovely and looked much younger than thirty-six. She had been an accountant in a law firm until her boss had

grabbed her one evening, called her his *little China doll*, and tried to kiss her. Liz had reacted by grabbing a letter-opener on her boss's desk, one that looked like a tiny ceremonial sword. As her boss had breathed cognac-scented breath in her face and asked if her *tight slant-eye slit was getting wet yet,* she stabbed him in the groin and cut him from nuts to navel. "I'm Vietnamese, you pig," she'd told him them. He bled out and died before anyone could even call 911. In court, Liz tried to argue that she was only defending herself. The prosecutor, that cold bastard named Lomax, brought up her history of failed relationships and made her look unstable and dangerous. She was put away for ten years.

"Why don't you lick my cunt?" Brenda was a big woman in her early fifties who often said, "Yeah, I'm a fuckin dyke, you got a problem with that?" She had beaten a man to death in a bar with her bare hands after he had seen her kissing her girlfriend at the time and had said they were *the most ass-ugly rug-munchers* he'd ever seen. Her lawyer was able to argue diminished capacity, Brenda *was* utterly shitfaced at the time, but Lomax had still put her away for twenty years.

"That's my job, bitch," Marisa said, her accent heavy. Marisa was twenty-eight, unspeakably beautiful, and unspeakably mean. She was also a former member of the Norteños who had been locked up for assault, arson and grand theft. The three strikes Lomax used to send her to prison were finally reduced to one after his retirement and after she spent a year sucking off two public defenders, a local representative of La Raza who publicized her mistreatment under the law as racial injustice, and a Ninth Circuit Court judge. She was sitting in the back seat beside Brenda. Her shoes were off and she had her feet in Brenda's lap. Brenda kissed one of her toes, and she squealed. "Ayyy, mami!"

All of them had met in the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville. The women thought they had been screwed by Lomax. All of them thought Lomax should be made to pay. Brenda and Marisa were the most aggressive on that final point, they wanted to tear Lomax's balls off and make him eat them. Liz was on the fence, but wanted the chance for a face to face with Lomax to plead her case and point out that he had been wrong, as pointless at that would be. Patty was just following in their wake. She had no friends or family and nowhere else to go.

"Here's the turn," Liz said, pointing to a narrow road on the right.

Patty turned off the state road and onto what was not a road at all, but the five mile driveway to Big Sky Estates.

Marisa offered Brenda another toe for the kissing.

Brenda smiled and looked down the road. "Get ready, Lomax. The Fingerbang Quartet is coming, and you are going to *pay,* you son of a bitch."

Lomax had dressed after his morning shower, tied his shoes, huffing with the effort to reach past a gut that hadn't been there ten years ago, and then looked at himself in the mirror.

Christ, he thought. I look like my father. He turned sideways. Welcome to Gut City. Then he raised his eyes and looked at his own face. There was a time when he avoided his own eyes in the mirror; there had been a hardness there that he really didn't like. Now that face was gentle. Open. Friendly. He smiled, and the smile came easily.

He patted his gut. A big belly for an easy smile. "Fair trade," he said, and went

downstairs where his rambunctious brood was already running amok, the big screen TV blasting Saturday morning cartoons.

Lomax went down the hall to the back door. He opened the door and peered through the screen. Lying on a plastic mat Lomax had put down were three prairie dogs, a skunk, and a porcupine. All of the animals looked vital and alive; their necks had been snapped so fast they had not time to react. Lomax frowned. Prairie dogs *did* make a mess of the acreage, and their holes and tunnels were especially dangerous to the horses Lomax kept in the corral, but using the porch as a dumping ground . . . At least they are on the mat, he thought.

The house was big. Lomax had his bedroom, a den, and a vast bathroom all to himself on the first floor. On the second floor were the girl's rooms; Claire, Annie and Shae were eleven, twelve and thirteen, and although they all had their own rooms, they usually spent their nights together in one of those rooms. They had been living at Big Sky Estates for a year now, and for these once lonely and abused young girls the thrill of having sisters, even if they were what they called paper-sisters, trumped the thrill of a big bedroom complete with TV, DVD player, and laptop. Despite her young age Claire was the acknowledged master of technology in the house. Annie was the resident *girl.* She liked nice dresses and fussing with her hair and watching teen dramas on TV. Shae was already mother hen to all the kids, helping Mrs. Mears in the kitchen, making sure the other children had bathed and brushed their teeth, and generally trying to maintain order when the others were getting ramped up over some looming event, as they were late on this Halloween morning.

On the third floor were rooms for Gary and Lyle and Eddy, although outside of winter Eddy spent most nights on or under the porch. Eddy had been spending more time in his room lately, although he usually slept under the bed, not on it, and he preferred looking out the window or watching shadows on the walls to TV. Eddy was ten. Lyle was nine, and enjoyed watching old black and white movies. Gary was six, and he was happiest with a pencil and paper, drawing whatever came to mind.

All of the kids had their own rooms, outfitted the same. All of them had been abused in one way or another. They all loved the freedom of the estate; endless miles to roam and no one to fear, and they all loved Lomax.

Until he took on these kids, Lomax had never been loved. He hadn't even known what love *was* until he was forty-five years old. He had been sitting on the big porch at the rear of the house overlooking the back spread of endless open fields, sipping lemonade and enjoying a fresh summer breeze on his face when Eddy came back from his morning run. The boy was wearing nothing but the khaki shorts he called *muh britches.* He had about twenty pair and from May to October they were all he ever wore. "Have fun?" Lomax had asked. Eddy was a tough case and Lomax wanted to give the boy plenty of room with no pressure. Eddy had picked up his water bowl from the bench near Lomax's rocker, slurped loudly as water trickled down his brown, skinny chest, and then had given Lomax a fierce hug, tucking his shaggy head under Lomax's chin.

Now when Lomax looked at his kids he felt strong and weak, protective and proud, and a fluttery *something* in his stomach made him feel giddy.

Big Sky's fourth floor was the cavernous attic, converted into storage rooms, a playroom, and an observatory, with a squat Celestron telescope set up in front of the French doors that led to a widow's walk.

There was also a spacious, maze-like basement. Lomax had lived here five years now and he still hadn't seen all the rooms down there; the original owner of Big Sky had been a bit of a basket case, building room after room underground, expanding far beyond the foundation of the house. There was the laundry room and a caged storage area for valuables and the room holding the massive furnace, and dozens of other halls and tunnels and rooms and cubbyholes.

Lomax entered the kitchen and said good morning to Shae and Mrs. Mears, who were filling cereal bowls, cooking eggs and making toast. Mrs. Mears looked at her wristwatch and raised an eyebrow.

"I slept in because we are celebrating Halloween tonight instead of during the week," Lomax said.

Lomax would have preferred to call the woman Sarah, but Mrs. Mears was a strong-willed Texan lady, a widow who was a few years younger than Lomax, patient, attentive, and very proper. She kept house, cooking, cleaning and caring for the kids. She also kept Lomax's life in order. She had a little three room cottage a half mile to the east on Lomax's property. From what little Lomax had learned she had been a teacher when she was younger, had lost her only child in some unspecified accident, and her husband had committed suicide when his oil venture had gone bust. All of this had happened when she was young. She had been working as a caretaker for young and old ever since and had excellent references.

"How are the kids, this morning?" Lomax asked her.

Shae looked over her shoulder and gave him a big smile. She had been born with a cleft palate left uncorrected until Lomax came along. Even after her surgery she had continued to hold one hand over her face until just recently.

"Annie, Lyle and Claire are in the TV room," Mrs. Mears said, pointing toward the hallway with a butter knife. "Gary is . . . Gary?"

"Here," Gary said softly, his voice coming from behind a big cereal box.

Lomax walked around the table, seeing the small boy hunched over a sketch pad. The kid had smudges of pencil lead on his fingers and one cheek.

"My artist-in-residence," Lomax asked. "What are you drawing?"

"A horth," Gary said. "A wild horth." Apparently this was an important distinction.

Lomax saw swooping lines, the suggestion of movement and muscle. It was more thought than picture, and he was impressed. "Well, that's just fine," he said, and Gary gave him a quick grin. Like a secret shared between them. Gary had been almost blind until Lomax paid for corrective surgery and some serious glasses. His parents had money for a wide-screen TV and big shiny SUV, but they let their little boy stumble around their home in a world of ghostly blurs.

"And Eddy?"

Mrs. Mears pointed the butter knife in the other direction, the back of the house. "Eddy is outside somewhere, being Eddy." She gave Lomax the slightest smile.

Lomax liked that smile. In fact, he liked everything about Mrs. Mears beyond her professional qualities. He guessed she was a couple of years younger than him, and he was just a few years shy of fifty. She was his height, and shapely, with the kind of hourglass figure that might finally be coming back into vogue. Her hair was strawberry blonde, like copper reflecting the sun, and her eyes were a very dark shade of blue.

"Mr. Lomax?"

"Yes," said, startled. A man could spend a lifetime looking in to those eyes. "There are more *critters* on the back porch," he said. Lomax was a city boy and he got squeamish dealing with the dead things left outside the back door each morning.

"I'll take care of them," Mrs. Mears said.

Was she hiding a smile now? Lomax suspected his unwillingness to handle dead things amused her to no end. She had once tried to explain that the kills left on the porch were offerings; he was the head of the household and was being honored as such. She also said that they were intended as food, and if he wanted she had recipes handed down from her grandmother and knew how to whip up a mean prairie dog stew or porcupine meatballs. Lomax had paled when he heard that, and she had laughed.

"It looks like things are under control here," he said, looking around the busy kitchen. "I think I'll help myself to—"

"Whole wheat toast with just a touch of butter," Mrs. Mears said to Shae. "Some melon, or berries, and a large glass of orange juice. Decaf, if coffee is necessary. No eggs, no bacon."

"Christ," Lomax said.

He sat at the table and ate what they served him, reading the morning news on his iPad and watching as the other children came into the kitchen and wolfed down their food, closely watching that crisp bacon shimmering with grease and those perfect fried eggs. The children went back to the TV room, ignoring Mrs. Mears' suggestion that they go play outside and get some fresh air. Lomax chuckled as a seemingly endless volley of *you did too—I did not* drifted from the other room.

Two hours later, after checking the markets and writing a few emails while Shae and Mrs. Mears cleaned the kitchen, Lomax stood and stretched. For a moment he thought he heard a car coming down the long driveway. "That was . . . nice. Not very filling, mind you, but nice."

"You're on a diet, dad," Shae said with a laugh. "It's good for you."

Mrs. Mears nodded. "I want to keep you around as long as possible," she said. "It's part of my job, of course."

Lomax was wondering if the woman was blushing when he heard someone coming up the porch steps in the front of the house. The doorbell rang.

"Are we expecting any deliveries today?"

"Not according to my calendar," Mrs. Mears said.

Lomax went down the hall, his step almost jaunty. He opened the door with a smile, wondering for a moment why the big woman standing there looked so familiar, and then his good mood vanished in the ether as the woman said his name as if describing something indescribably filthy and clipped him across the face with an automatic pistol.

"Happy Halloween, motherfucker," Brenda said.

Liz hadn't expected the gun. She knew Brenda was crazy-mean, but she had insisted that they talk to Lomax first, try to reason with him, try to make him see that what he had done was wrong.

Brenda had looked up at the sun as they started up the steps of the wide porch. "It's high noon in Payback County," she had said with a coarse laugh, kicking a carved pumpkin off of the porch.

Then the door had opened and Brenda made a gun appear from nowhere and lashed out with it.

Marisa clapped her hands and let out a shout as Brenda pushed Lomax and he stumbled backward, blood running from a nasty cut on his right cheek. She thought Lomax looked fat and soft. She thought this would be easy as she followed Brenda and Liz into the house.

"Patty, get your ass in here," Brenda said, and Patty followed, as Patty always did.

Brenda closed the door.

A woman stepped into the hall. She was wearing a practical skirt and blouse, and an apron. She stared at the women for a moment.

"Hey look," Brenda said with a laugh. "It's June fuckin Cleav—"

The woman turned and ran, slamming a door shut in her wake.

Brenda let out a bull roar that filled the hallway. "Get back here you *cunt!"*

Mrs. Mears grabbed Gary, put his little hand in Shae's, and gave them a gentle shove toward the TV room. "Get your brothers and sisters down into the basement *now.* Find a place to hide. There are bad people in the house. *Go."*

She closed the door to the TV room just as the door to the hall was slammed open. A young woman came into the kitchen. She was beautiful, despite the tattoos and the hard look in her eyes.

"Get out of this house," Mrs. Mears said.

"You ain't in fuckin Kansas no more, bitch," the woman said.

"I'm from Texas, you little piece of trash."

"You fuck," Marisa whispered. "I oughta rip that red hair right outta your fuckin head."

"Sweetheart, you'd get a lot further in life if you'd let your pretty face do the talking. You are suffering an irreparable deficit of eloquence."

"Kick her teeth in, baby," Brenda said, leading Lomax into the kitchen. "Everyone else, take a seat at the table. Breakfast is served."

Liz and Patty sat down. Brenda shoved Lomax into a chair and sat beside him.

Marisa stepped closer to Mrs. Mears, who did her damndest to stand her ground. She had to. She had to give the children enough time to get away from these women, whoever they were.

Marisa reached out and touched a lock of hair that had escaped from Mrs. Mears' loose braid. "Fuckin color's probably fake, anyways. Ugly redheaded freak."

His head was finally clearing, and when Lomax saw the look on Mrs. Mears face he said, "Sarah, don't—"

Brenda shouted, "Shut up!"

"*Don't* touch me," Mrs. Mears said.

Marisa took something out of her pocket, an honest to God switchblade, and flicked it open. Etched into the shining steel was an image of Christ on the cross.

"You don' like being touched?" Marisa asked. With her free hand she squeezed Mrs. Mears' right breast. "Yo, she's fuckin stacked," Marisa said. Turning to Lomax she asked, "You hittin this, papi?"

Mrs. Mears slapped Marisa's face. Marisa pushed the woman back against the wall and used the knife to cut off a lock of red hair.

"I'll take a bigger souvenir next time if you try doing that again, you stupid bitch." She shoved the woman toward the table. "Sit fuckin down."

Mrs. Mears sat on Lomax's other side.

He was wondering where the children were when an Asian woman spoke up. She was another one of the group who looked familiar. Hell, they *all* looked familiar.

"There are a lot of placemats here for just two people."

Mrs. Mears believed in placemats. They helped contain the inevitable mess created by the children.

Brenda turned the gun on Lomax. "Who else is in the house?"

"Brenda Creeley," Lomax said. "I remember you now."

Patty started nibbling on a leftover piece of toast. "Put that down," Brenda said.

"And you're Patty Paulson," Lomax said. Patty looked away.

"Mr. Lomax," Liz said, "We wanted to talk to you about what you did to us in court. We wanted you to hear our side of—

"Elizabeth Nguyen," Lomax said. "You gutted a man."

Liz looked hurt.

Lomax remembered that look as she was sentenced by the judge. He also remembered the coroner's description of what she had done to her boss. She hadn't simply poked him with the letter opener to ward off his unwanted advances; and chances are that would have worked and she would have gotten off with an assault charge from the man, if any at all. No, she had sawed through layers of the man's flesh, fat and muscle from the left side of his scrotum, all the way up to his navel. The coroner had testified that the man had bled out fast, but not fast enough to experience excruciating pain.

Brenda rocked back in her chair, raising it on two legs while she kept the gun on Lomax. She was a big woman and the sturdy wooden chair creaked under her weight.

"These are nice fucking chairs, lawyer-man. I bet they cost a shitload."

She was wearing jeans, work boots, and a flannel shirt under a denim jacket. Her hair was cut very short. She stood and reached into a back pocket. "Good thing I got two of these." She held up two pairs of handcuffs, tossing one to Marisa. "Cuff June Cleaver to her chair like I do with Ward here. Liz?" Liz stepped close and grimaced when Brenda handed her the gun. "Keep a bead on Lomax. If he tries anything, shoot him."

"Hands behind your back," Brenda said. There was a gap between the frame of the chair back and the backrest. When Lomax reached back she guided his arms through those gaps and then cuffed his wrists together.

Marisa watched this, and repeated the procedure with Mrs. Mears.

"This is your moment of truth, Elizabeth," Lomax said. His tone was calm and clear. He could have been addressing a jury in one of his patented *just between us folks* moments. "You can turn that gun on Brenda and Marisa, or you can let them take you down a path that will be dark indeed, and—"

Brenda stepped in front of Lomax and drove a fist into his gut. *"Shut up!"*

Mrs. Mears cried out as if she had been hit. Lomax looked at her and smiled despite the pain. "I guess it's a good thing I had a light breakfast after all," he gasped.

"Gun," Brenda said to Liz, holding out one hand.

Liz hesitated, just for a moment, and then gave the automatic to Brenda.

Brenda turned her own chair around and straddled it, facing Lomax. She told Patty to check the other door.

"Now, tough guy. Who else is in the house?"

"What a sad creature you are," Lomax said. He heard Mrs. Mears gasp. He wasn't trying to be a tough guy. He'd taken two hits and both had hurt like hell. He didn't want to be hit again, but he wanted the kids to have time to hide in the crazy warren of rooms and corridors down in the basement.

Brenda only laughed. "This is gonna to be fun."

Patty had gone through the door opposite the door they had come in, and now she was back. "There's cartoons on the TV. And games and stuff in that room."

"And there are a lot of dishes and cutlery drying in the dish rack." Liz said.

"What," Brenda said, "Are you two making like ma and pa Walton?"

Lomax simply stared at her.

Marisa reached around Mrs. Mears from behind and squeezed both of the older woman's breasts this time. "These are *nice,* considering how old this bitch is. Ain't no way a buncha babies been sucking on these. I bet Mr. Lomax been titty-fucking them though."

Brenda glanced at Marisa, clearly annoyed. "Why don't you let go of her?" Marisa did as told. Brenda laughed again. "I can't picture Ward here banging away at June, I really can't, but I guess anything is possible."

Marisa looked at Lomax with loathing. "No *way* I'd let that cock inside me. Hey, mami, do you let him fuck those titties or do you just lie back and take it for—"

"The children are adopted," Mrs. Mears said. She was flustered and embarrassed and angry.

"Sarah," Lomax said softly, "Don't say any more."

Brenda pointed the gun at the ceiling. "Liz, Marisa, check upstairs. Find those kids. Patty, take a look outside, and if there's a basement check that."

When they were gone Brenda sat silently for a while, then she chuckled. "Lomax. Strutting through the courtroom, swinging those big fucking balls around and twisting every jury to think just like you. You and your teams of little secretaries or paralegals or whatever they were. Were you banging them, Lomax? You always had pretty ones with you taking notes and carrying your cases of files. I bet you did. I bet you made them blow you."

He *had* done just that, but Lomax considered that his old life, something he was trying to make up for.

Brenda got up and got a glass of water. When she sat down again, she brought edge of the gun butt down on Lomax's left knee. He wasn't expecting it, and he let out a yell.

She laughed her raw, throaty laugh. "Hurts, huh?"

Lomax said nothing. He wanted to tell her she was just a raw-boned ugly dyke with no brains, thinning hair and eyes that looked like the lids had been peeled off, cold, ignorant reptile eyes. But he kept his mouth shut. He didn't want her going off on Mrs. Mears.

Mrs. Mears asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"Sarah," Lomax said. *"Be quiet."*

Mrs. Mears cocked a defiant eyebrow at him.

Brenda looked at Lomax a moment and then punched him in the gut again, putting her considerable weight and muscle behind the blow. "She's got a right to speak.

Every woman has a right to speak. Guys like you don't want a woman to speak. Guys like you just want to fill a woman's mouth with cock."

Lomax couldn't say anything. One more hit like that and he was going to puke.

Brenda got up and stepped close to Mrs. Mears. "Why am I doing this? Because that fucker Lomax has to be taught a lesson. And because I can." She touched Mrs. Mears braid, looking at the colors within those red and gold strands. "Figures that even out here in the middle of fuck all Lomax would find himself a babe." Brenda cupped Mrs. Mears' cheek, and then bent quickly, kissing her on the lips.

"You dis*gust*ing woman," Mrs. Mears said, as she turned her face away.

Brenda's face colored, becoming a dull red, like sun-bleached brick. She jammed a hand up under Mrs. Mears skirt. "If I wanna—"

"What the *fuck* is this?"

Brenda turned and saw Marisa standing by the door to the hall. She shrugged. "Just playing around, *mi niña."*

Marisa came into the kitchen, followed by Liz. "We didn't see any kids upstairs," Liz said.

Patty appeared a moment later. "Brenda, I checked outside like you asked, but the basement . . . It's crazy down there, all dark, and there's all kinds of weird twists and turns."

"For fuck sake," Brenda said. She got up, crossed the hall to the basement door, and fired a single shot down into the darkness. She shouted, her voice rolling like thunder. "If you kids aren't up here and in the kitchen in five minutes I am going to shoot your daddy dead!"

Lomax opened his mouth to tell the children to stay hidden. Marisa was ready for him. She had a rag from the kitchen sink in one hand, and she stuffed it in his mouth.

Before the five minutes were up Claire, Lyle, Annie, Shae and Gary came into the kitchen. Gary and Claire were crying. Lyle was quiet and clearly angry. Annie was white with fear. Shae hugged Gary to her.

"Geez," Brenda said, gesturing with the gun toward Shae and Annie. "Those two are getting ripe. You poking them, Lomax?"

"Shut your filthy mouth," Shae said. Marisa slapped the girl so hard she fell to one knee. Gary started crying.

"Fucking Christ, I need a drink," Brenda said. She got up and started opening cupboard doors. At the back of a high shelf she found a bottle of bourbon. She took a deep swallow as if it were water and then sat by Lomax again. "You kids, sit on the floor. *Now!*"

They did as they were told.

Brenda looked them over. "Christ, Lomax, you got girls, boys, a couple of whites, a half-breed with a big mouth," that was directed at Shae, "and a nigger and a chink." Brenda didn't see Marisa and Liz frowning at this. "It's a hell of a collection. Is this everyone?"

Gary looked toward the kitchen window.

"Who's missing?"

No one said a thing.

Brenda leaned close to Lomax. She unzipped his fly and reached into his pants. "I'll tear your daddy's pee-pee off and *eat* it if you don't tell me who isn't here," Brenda

said.

Lomax's face burned red with shame and he bellowed, "You psychotic bitch!"

"Eddy," Gary said. "He'th my big brother. He'th ten and when he theeth you he'th going to be really mad!" Then he started crying again. Shae hugged him and tried to calm him down.

"Well," Brenda said, zipping up Lomax's fly and taking another drink. "Eddy." She looked at Mrs. Mears and grinned. "He got hard when I had my hand on him."

"Bullshit," Mrs. Mears said with utter contempt. "I know what it is to arouse a man. One look at you tells me *you* do not."

The older kids, who understood what Mrs. Mears was saying, gaped in astonishment.

"You're gonna get yours," Brenda said to Mrs. Mears. Then she smiled at the children, and her smile was mean. "Here's what we're gonna do. Each one of my friends here is gonna tell your daddy how mean he was to them, and you're all going to listen. I'm gonna give him a piece of my mind too. When we're done, we'll decide if he should live, or die." She looked at Mrs. Mears. "And I'm personally gonna fuck up that pretty face and that big mouth."

The children started crying again, even Lyle, who had tried to act like a grown-up.

One by one the women stood before Lomax and railed at him, detailing his offenses against them and the legal system.

It was just past six in the evening when they finished. The sun had set outside, and a cool wind was blowing around the house.

Brenda had been the last, screaming at Lomax and blaming him, and men like him, for everything that had gone wrong in her life. When she was done she straddled her chair again and spoke softly.

"Do you have anything to say, Lomax?"

"Yes," he said. He looked at Brenda with pity, and regret. "It's dark outside. It's dinner time. And Eddy is coming home."

There were five things Eddy loved. In truth there were more than five, but when he tried to count beyond that number things grew hazy, and became just one more vast and hazy thing he loved.

Eddy loved running. He ran for countless hours in every season, ranging to the far limits of the Big Sky Estate. In the spring he chased thunderstorms and in the summer he ran with the horses. In the fall he chased the wind, and in the winter he chased rabbits and deer. In the summer he often took a break in the heat of the day, sleeping under the porch in the spot Father had cleared for him while Father sat in his chair overhead, reading a book or just watching the big sky or the shadows of clouds moving across the world. Sometimes Father read aloud from his books, and sometimes Eddy understood the words, but usually he just napped, with Father watching over him.

Eddy loved hunting. Father had told Eddy not to take down any big animals. No deer or wolves or horses. He chased them anyway, pretending to hunt, and when he hunted for real, giving in to the urges that drove him, he would hunt prairie dogs and other small creatures. He always left them on the back porch for Father.

Eddy loved family. It took him a very long time to accept the scents of Father and Mrs. Mears and his brothers and sisters, but now they were a part of him. Father smelled

strong and Mrs. Mears smelled warm and the children smelled of chocolate and chalk and grass stains and Kool Aid, and they all had their own special smells too, like Gary, who smelled of his little writing sticks. He loved them all.

Eddy loved home. Home was the smells of the kitchen and the soap Mrs. Mears used to scrub him down in the big bathtub every night while saying, "Honestly, I don't know how one little boy can get so filthy in one day." Home was his bedroom, which he rarely used, but it was his, all that space was *his*, and home was his favorite spot under the back porch. Home was the place Eddy protected, his den, his safe place, his pack.

Most of all Eddy loved Father. His old life was receding to a blur now, but sometimes he remembered it and those memories made him love Father even more. He remembered how he'd been beaten and kept in a basement, *as long as the checks keep comin,* a man who smelled like whiskey and cigarettes used to say. He remembered chains on his legs and being hit with a broom handle. He remembered seeing Father for the first time and feeling a big warm hand on his face and hearing *why he's just a little boy* and *you need a bath, young man, and room to run* and then Father had taken him home. He remembered the Rules of Father; don't take down any big animals, don't go beyond the far fences because people wouldn't understand you, love your family, protect your brothers and sisters, be a good boy.

The things Eddy loved went through his mind in a flash as he stood on the grassy veldt Lomax called the back field. He stood and breathed deeply of scents carried on the rising wind; fear, from his family, especially his brothers and sisters, and anger, from strangers. Strangers in his home. Strangers making his family feel afraid.

He could smell blood. Father was bleeding.

Eddy looked up at the silver sliver of moon high in the sky and shook his shaggy head. Then he broke into a loping, easy run for home.

Brenda knew there was a big back porch on Lomax's home because they had all circled the house once before coming up the front stairs. They were looking for dogs, which Brenda would have shot dead if she saw them. There wasn't much in life that intimidated her, but dogs, big dogs, scared her.

"Patty," she said, "Go to the back door and see if anyone is coming. Liz, you check the front. You don't have to stand outside and freeze your tits off, just keep an eye out the window."

Liz and Patty left the kitchen.

"You adopted *six* kids, Lomax? Trying to make up for all the bad shit you did?"

"In a manner of speaking," Lomax replied. "But I do not count my treatment of your quartet of reprobates among my sins."

Brenda didn't do a slow burn this time. That dull red brick color filled her face instantly. She pressed the barrel of the gun against Lomax's left shoulder and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot was muffled and before the children started screaming Lomax heard splinters from the back of his chair and his own bone fragments striking the floor and the wall behind him. If the punches to the gut and getting pistol whipped were trips to the second or third floor of a house of pain, the gunshot that shattered his shoulder was jet-propelled trip up to the observation deck of a skyscraper. The pain was immense, and it rolled over him like a black tsunami.

"You killed him!"

Brenda looked at Mrs. Mears and then back at Lomax. "Nah, he's still breathing. He—"

A stabbing pain flared in her left thigh and she looked down. A number two pencil was sticking out of her leg and her blue jeans were turning purple as they soaked up her own blood. Gary was standing at her side, defiant.

"You little *cocksucker!"*

Brenda backhanded Gary and he fell to the floor crying. Lyle took a step forward and Brenda stood and kicked him in the gut. He fell on his side and vomited on the floor. Shae tried to stand up and Marisa grabbed her by the hair and threw her back down to the floor.

"Stop it," Lomax said. He wanted it to come out in a roar. Instead it was a pathetic wheeze. "You don't know what you're doing. Eddy is coming."

Brenda pulled the pencil out of her thigh and said, "*Fuck* Eddy," and then raised the gun when she heard a metallic squeal, the clatter of wood, and a long, wavering scream from Patty at the back of the house.

"Marisa," Brenda said, easing herself into the chair again. "Go see what the fuck Patty's doing back there."

"Okay," Marisa said. She didn't sound as sure of herself as she had earlier. Holding her switchblade in one hand, she crept down the hall.

In the half light from the kitchen she saw Patty huddled by the back door. The door was open. The exterior screen door had been torn from its hinges and was lying on the porch. Patty was making shivery, gabbling noises as she hunkered down the dark.

"Patty, what the fuck are you doin, bitch?" Marisa grabbed Patty's shoulder and shook her, and pulled her to her feet, and when Patty turned around it was Marisa's turn to scream.

At the front door, Liz saw the doorknob turning. She pulled the door open, thinking the sooner she grabbed this ten year old boy and had everyone accounted for, the sooner they would be done and out of here, and she dearly wanted out of here.

She only had a moment to register something orange coming at her and then the carved pumpkin from the porch struck her on one hip and burst open.

She shouted, "You little brat!" and stepped onto the front porch just as someone, some *thing,* leaped up the stairs and came at her, teeth bared, jaws wide.

Marisa ran into the kitchen screaming, *"Her face, her face, something took her face,"* and before Brenda could even begin to calm her, Liz appeared and took one last unsteady step through the kitchen doorway. Rhythmic jets of blood sprayed from Liz's ravaged throat and her last breaths were released as small and wrenchingly sad piping sounds, like a breeze blowing on a broken reed. Liz dropped dead onto the kitchen floor, and Marisa screamed again.

Brenda looked at the children, and Mrs. Mears, and Lomax. They weren't screaming now. The younger children were grinning. The half-breed with the scar on her lip looked triumphant. Mrs. Mears head hung down, and she might have been whispering a prayer. Lomax said, "I'm sorry. I really am."

"Bullshit," Brenda said, standing. "This is bullshit and if you think I'm going to be scared—"

Something darted by the door to the TV room. Brenda fired a shot at a blur, naked

flesh, shaggy hair, and then the mask of a woman's face, it *had* to be a mask, slapped the floor at Brenda's feet.

There was movement in the hall doorway again. Brenda turned and shot at it with a barking laugh and saw a thing without a face, a thing wearing Patty's blood-soaked clothes. It staggered and fall against one wall.

Marisa said one more word, "No," and then ran out into the hall. She was crying as she pulled the car keys from Patty's pocket, hearing guttural, barking laughter from outside the front door. She ran down the hall in the opposite direction and jumped off the back porch. She almost made it to the side of the house when she felt twin flares of pain in her ankles and fell hard, her Achilles' tendons slashed in two. She began to crawl, only realizing that her pants and panties were ripped away when she felt the cold night air on her skin. There was another burst of pain from one cheek of her ass and she rolled onto her side to see a slender, shaggy-haired shape outlined by the light from inside the house. The thing was holding her buttock in both hands and biting into it and chewing. Marisa was still convinced she could crawl around the house to the car as slender, boyish hands twisted her head with incredible strength, shattering the bones of her neck.

Brenda stepped onto the back porch and saw the thing, whatever it was, let go of Marisa. Her *niña*'s head lolled loosely. Brenda fired a shot and was sure she hit it, but the thing leaped to one side, out of the light. She saw a dark blur and fired again and again, until pulling the trigger produced nothing but a dry click. She threw the gun away.

"Fuck this, she said. She went back into the kitchen, took a big knife from the dish drainer by the sink and then grabbed the smallest kid, that little fuck Gary, and dragged him out onto the back porch. "I don't know what the fuck you are," she shouted, standing tall, her fear giving way to confidence, "but I'm walking outta here in one piece or this kid—"

The old boards of the porch exploded between her feet and a shaggy head shot up. Brenda saw red eyes above a narrow muzzle and jaws gaping wide. Sharp teeth clamped shut on her crotch and she dropped the knife, letting go of Gary as those teeth sank deep, tearing denim and flesh. The head twisted back and forth, pulling at a meaty plug of skin and muscle and ripping away her very center. A torrent of blood spilled out of her and she felt light-headed.

Brenda took a step, her face as white as the moon, and then she fell down the porch steps, the last of her blood rushing out of her as the shaggy-haired thing stood over her and sniffed at her in curiosity.

Lomax felt relief when Gary ran into the kitchen, running right into Shae's open arms.

Eddy padded into the room a moment later. He was covered in blood and pawing at a wound on one arm.

Lomax saw a gleam of light on metal and realized Eddy was holding the key to the handcuffs. Eddy licked one of Mrs. Mears' hands, and then gently set his head in Lomax's lap.

"Daddy," Eddy said

"Good boy," Lomax said, scratching behind one of Eddy's ears and realizing they had one hell of a cleanup job ahead. "That's a good boy."

INFECTED, YELLOWING MOMENTS
Brian Fatah Steele

Brian Fatah Steele, a member of the indie author co-op Dark Red Press, describes the majority of his work as "Epic Horror with lots of Explosions." Along with having written multiple books, his articles and stories have appeared in various e-magazines and online journals. Steele lives in Ohio with a few cats that are probably plotting his doom. Surviving on a diet primarily of coffee and cigarettes, he occasionally dabbles in Visual Arts and Music Production. He still hopes to one day become a Super Villain.

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Sometimes our daily lives take a turn we wouldn't usually expect. It's no one's fault, there's nobody to blame, and that makes us all the more mad. We like to think we're in control, and in fact, have deluded ourselves into believing we're the masters of our little corner of the universe. It's quite shocking when we realize we're nothing more than passengers, and even more brutal the surprise when we discover our trivial desires are of little consequence.

Every moment of our lives we are manipulated by forces far greater than ourselves. We are held sway by higher concepts, but rarely do we fight our imprisonment. We don't like to admit we are bombarded by these external powers and held fast by them, don't like to think about it, for it would call our own fragile identities into question. False excuses and even weaker justifications are given to make sense of the lunacy we routinely experience. In all honesty, we are raw things, quite malleable, and out there beyond our safe bubbles of contentment, are players that would see us fashioned into their own toys. Arguments can be made that we live in a more enlightened era, more informed, that we are aware and awake. Unfortunately, we remain that green, budding plant. We grow, taking in their poison as we ripen, never realizing we've become infected and yellowing, until it's too late to recognize the rot.

Take the celebration of Halloween. It is a holiday, once known as the Celtic *Samhain* meant to honor the dead and dedicated to the harvest. The Catholic Church merged it with their All Saint's Day many centuries ago, and today we have children clad in the plastic masks of the latest cartoon craze knocking on their neighbor's door for candy. An idea taken, changed to fit, used, taken again. This is by far not a new thing. Creations and cultures have been stolen and passed of as new longer than there has been written word. The true origins of Halloween are undoubtedly lost to modern societies – and we don't really care. But don't forget how ripe you still are. When does that poison factor in, that decay come in to play?

You're already a corpse before you know it's happened.

Dusk comes early at the tail end of October in Ohio. It was Saturday, the 30th, technically the day before Halloween, but most of Logres had it's Trick Or Treating hours tonight. While the city officials would claim it was due to Saturday being an easier night for more parents, it was really to appease those few religious folk who would run screeching down to the Mayor's Office should a "pagan festival" occur on the Lord's Day.

The morning had been busy at Thru-Drug. Although the date was pretty self-evident, the local newspaper had been printing the Trick Or Treat times wrong for the past three days. Only today had the moneys at work over at The Logres Daily printed a correction notice, adding a small apology at the bottom. Kim didn't think it had helped much. Mostly she heard people swearing and threatening a Frankenstein-like "pitchfork and torches" style lynching of the newspaper building as they frantically bought their candy. Overall, she was pretty pleased with the idiots at the paper – they had nearly sold out of their seasonal candy stock thanks to the rush.

Leaning back against the counter, Kim tried to decide if she wanted a cigarette or not. She had only ever been a social smoker, but this past semester had been far more stressful that any previous. Eyeing her neon pink purse emblazoned with green skulls where it was hidden under the counter, she chewed on her lip. The corner of a pack of Camels peeked out at her invitingly.

"Hey, Kim," yelled Wes from his register. "I'm going out for a smoke, okay?"

"You're a bastard, Wes."

Her co-worker gave her a goofy grin as he locked his drawer and slid out from behind his counter. His brown hair a perpetual mess in that questionable style, his blue shirt had two thin paint marks across the front. They looked relatively fresh.

"What happened to you?"

"Huh?" replied Wes, looking down at his slim frame to where she was pointing. "Oh, I was helping Angie in the back. Dwight was, er… busy."

"For fuck's sake," muttered Kim. "Go smoke."

As Wes ambled out the door, Kim hit the buzzer to ring for Angie back in receiving. She liked both Angie and Wes, Kim and Wes even had some of the same tastes in music, but he had been holding Angie's hand on this job for too long. Especially when it came to Dwight.

Kim didn't mind her job, but she had harbored a few reservations about taking the assistant manager's position. At twenty-eight, she was in a distinctly weird age bracket at Thru-Drug. A larger chain pharmacy and convenience store, almost all of the employees were either firmly in middle age or right out of high school. She had snagged part-time after she had moved back to Logres over a year ago when she had re-enrolled at Franklin State University. Kim felt ancient compared to the kids who made up most of the cashiers and stockers, and felt like a freakin' alien compared to the PTA homeowners who comprised the pharmacy team and management.

"Um, yeah Kim?"

Kim sighed inwardly. Angie was a year or two younger than Wes, and had about as many curves. Thin blonde hair and anime-large blue eyes that hid behind glasses made her seem even younger. *Was I ever this innocent?* thought Kim, as she stared at Angie. Angie just stood there awkwardly, not making eye contact.

"So… why does Wes have paint all over him?"

"Um…"

"Yes?"

"He was helping me?"

"He was? And where was Dwight?"

Silence.

Kim sighed loudly this time. "Angie, when you're on receiving duty, you get to

boss around the stockers. Dwight is a stocker. Wes is a cashier. I know you and Wes have been tight since you were little, but I need everybody to do their job. Is there a problem with Dwight?"

"Dwight is…" she whispered.

"Dwight is what?"

"Nothing."

Kim peered at Angie and didn't say anything. Dwight was the general bane in her Thru-Drug existence. The only other employee in their late twenties, he was Dr. Melissa Homme's cousin and an all-around annoyance to the other workers. He was lazy, he didn't like any form of authority, and he occasionally said creepy shit to the younger females on staff. Wes had been dumb enough to get in his face one time after he had said something to Angie. Dwight was six-foot-four and over two hundred and fifty pounds.

"Listen, I'll make sure Dwight does…"

"Excuse me?"

Kim jumped. She hadn't seen the old woman walk up.

"I'm sorry, can I help you?"

"Yes. Yes…"

Angie took a step back. So did Kim. The old woman had drawn the word out almost like a hiss. Kim gave her a once over and blinked. Her clothes were faded, a strange dingy brown and her styled hair looked messed. Angie gave a little cough when the woman reached up with a dirty finger to slowly rub a rotting tooth exposed when she gave them a smile.

"Yes?" Kim tried again.

"Do you have any fish hooks?"

"Fish hooks?"

"I don't think…" began Angie.

The old woman interrupted, "Oh, that's okay." She hummed badly off key as she wandered away.

Once she had vanished around into aisle, Angie let out a breath. "What the hell was that?"

Off to the west, the sun lost its daily battle to the darkness and the sky grew into deeper shades of purple and orange. Kim sat outside on the tiny bench beside the soda machines that nobody ever used and smoked a cigarette, thinking about her abnormal psychology test. At least, she was *trying* to think about it. Mostly, she was trying not to think about Drew. After two years with Drew down in Atlanta, she had left. It had been her choice in the end, but it still hurt. Returning to Logres had seemed like admitting defeat at the time, but once she had come back she had realized that she had fared far better than most of her peers.

So many of her old friends had settled down – or simply settled. Loveless marriages, dead-end jobs, two-point-five kids, the white picket fence dream that didn't really exist anymore. Of course, that was Logres. The manager, Joyce, was an old family friend and was thrilled to hire Kim while she returned to school. Dr. Homme, on the other hand, the pharmacy head with her Volvo and her PTA meetings, took one look at Kim's tattoos, piercings and black hair and felt instant revulsion. All of it amused Kim greatly. She took out her lip ring before shift and all of her tats were covered.

"Fucking Ohio," stated Kim, as she flicked her spent cigarette butt out into the parking lot in an act of immature defiance. *She'd* be the one to clean it up later.

Stepping back inside, she saw Wes leaning over the counter and trying to engage a customer in conversation. He glanced over to her with a pleading look on his face. Brows creased, she walked past.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah, I don't even know," replied Wes, clearly exasperated.

Diagonally, at one of the corner displays, a heavy-set man was digging through the candy bars. He made desperate wheezing sounds, punctuated by short whines. His frantic search grew more aggressive.

"Sir, can I help you find anything?"

His snapped up, rigid for a moment, then his head teetered like a bobble dolls'. Kim and Wes gasped in unison. His eyes were bloodshot and he had something that suspiciously looked like mucus running from his nose and mouth. When he opened his mouth to whine, they could see his teeth were just as grime-encrusted as the fingernails gripping handfuls of candy bars.

"Wants… you gots…"

"Sir, are… are you okay?" asked Kim.

He wheezed twice then whined loudly before shambling off quickly down an aisle still clutching a dozen candy bars. Kim and Wes stood frozen for a three count. Then Wes shook his head violently.

"Did you just see that?"

"We had an old lady earlier… listen, he's gotta be sick or something. Get Dwight on the buzzer. I'm gonna go find him."

"You sure?"

Kim took off down through the store, hearing Wes yell *Be careful!* behind her. She passed along the front so that she could see down the aisles. The store was essentially one big box, and the set up was designed to allow the employees a better way of keeping track of "customers' needs." This translated into shoplifters. Even though the second row of aisles were slightly off-angle… nothing.

"Where the hell did he go?" Kim murmured to herself.

So intent on her search down the aisles, she didn't notice the little boy until she ran into him. Stumbling into a display table of donuts and other assorted pastries, Kim stood back and looked down to see him peering fascinated into a freezer unit. From behind him, she could just make out his reflection in the glass door. Words tried to tumble out at the same time she took in the blackened, filthy little fingers pressed against the cool glass.

"Meat!" came an itty-bitty voice. "I like meat. Mommy is meat, and Daddy is meat. And I like meat!"

"Where… where are your mommy and daddy?" asked Kim as she backed away from the boy.

"They're meat!" said the boy, never turning from the freezer unit door.

Kim sped down the frozen food aisle. She spun around past the beer and wine and stopped short by the open door leading back to the stockroom. She could hear Joyce and Dr. Homme babbling with Maria, the pharmacy tech, only feet away, but for some reason she hesitated at the dark opening. She knew Angie was right through the short

hall, working on pricing. She knew…

Something touched her shoulder and she screamed.

"Jesus, Kim! What's with you?"

She stared up at Dwight's pale, chubby face screwed up into a scowl. Letting a sigh of relief that almost turned into hysterical laughter, she patted him on the arm. He flinched at the touch.

"Nothing, it's… I'm sorry. There are some serious weird people in the store right now."

He cocked an eyebrow high on her for this one. Dwight found her "Goth" lifestyle quite high on his weird meter. He had made it blatantly obvious that he was both disgusted and freaked out by her – and disliked the fact that he had to answer to her as an assistant manager.

"There's a… overweight gentleman. And a little boy. I think he's sick. The man I mean, not the little boy. Just, shit, just help me find both of them, okay?"

"Help you find a fat guy and a kid?"

"Just… please, Dwight?"

Maybe it was the "please." Probably it was the look on Kim's face. Dwight continued his bug-eyed examination of her for a few more seconds, then shrugged. He went off towards beer and wine with less stomping than he usually employed. Kim closed her eyes, dry washed her face and quietly counted to five. When she opened her eyes, she heard laughter ringing out from the pharmacy.

Moving along, she came to the pickup window and Joyce's brightly smiling face. Kim had known Joyce most of her life, the older woman growing up with Kim's mom. They had always stayed friends and Kim had looked on her much like a surrogate aunt. Her wavy brown hair had gone almost all grey, but Joyce refused to get what she called a "matron-cut." She still wore it long and often in a ponytail.

"Hey Kim, what's the word?"

"Hey Joyce, have you…"

The question drifted off as Dr. Homme strolled around the corner, giving her a cold glare.

"Hi, Melissa."

"Kim," she replied.

Kim tried not to grit her teeth when it became apparent Dr. Homme wasn't going anywhere. "Have either of you seen, well… an overweight man or a little boy come past here recently? They may have looked sick?"

"A lot of people we see here look sick, Kim."

Kim fought back the urge to jump the counter and strangle the pharmacist.

"As in the last few minutes?"

"No, I don't think so," said Joyce.

Kim pondered this as Maria, the pharmacy tech, hefted an armload of paperwork past and gave her a boisterous greeting she hardly heard. When she thought about it, except for now, she hadn't been away from the front registers in hours except to smoke – out front. She had never noticed either of the customers enter. In fact…

"What about an older lady?" Kim asked.

"Huh?"

"I… I saw an old lady earlier. She looked kinda sick, too. Same as the other

two."

"Sick *how,* Kim?" Dr. Homme asked, displeased the conversation was continuing.

She tried to figure out how to explain it. "Um, red eyes and snotty. Talking weird? Something wrong with their… mouths and fingers."

"Kim, I don't think…"

"Ewww! I saw some old dude like that earlier!" shouted Maria from the back.

"What?"

Maria sauntered her considerable bulk out from her cubby space, eyes lit and ready for gossip. "Oh yeah, tall and old. What's the word? Emancipated?"

"Emaciated?"

"Yeah! His fingernails and teeth were all black, like he'd been chewing on an ink pen and he was saying all kindsa nasty stuff. Somethin' about killing dogs."

Kim just stared at her.

"Freakazoid. Eh, it's been a slow evening at least. Hey, I'm going to go grab me a diet shake… you gals want anything?"

Dr. Homme simply walked away as Kim shook her head and Joyce said a pleasant *no thank you,* trying to keep the smirk from her face. Maria drank an average of six "diet shakes" per shift. Usually while eating a bag of chips. Kim turned to leave as well, but Joyce gave a tiny yank on her sleeve.

"Kim, I really wish you and Melissa could figure out how to get along."

"Joyce, I have nothing against her, " Kim said in a low growl. "But Dr. Homme has made it clear she doesn't care for me."

"She's just…" trailed off Joyce, trying to find the word.

"It doesn't matter."

Kim stormed off back towards the front of the store, momentarily too pissed off to worry about all the creepy folks running around. Thru-Drug was a *larger* chain, but far from one of the biggest. Joyce had lost her last two pharmacists to national chains who could pay more. Basically if it came down to it, Kim was dispensable if the risk was losing Dr. Homme.

Swearing to herself. Kim rounded the corner to the checkout area and stopped short. It was empty, abandoned. No customers, no employees. Wes wasn't at his register, Maria wasn't raiding the cooler. Dwight wasn't even loitering about.

"Wes?" she heard herself whisper.

Mankind does not truly know the meaning of silence. We still can hear vehicles in the distance, the hum of electrical lighting and other mechanized devices running. In more primitive times, that silence would have been filled with the rustle of leaves, the movement of furtive animals and perhaps water lapping against whatever nearby shore. Yet, were we to have those few seconds of utter quiet, it would still not be true silence. We can not help, in those times, but hear the beating of our own heart.

Standing there beside a towering display of men's shaving products, Kim heard the sound of her own heartbeat and nothing else. What she felt, however, was something horribly foreign, something incorrect and near-reprehensible. This feeling is what made her scream.

"Wes!"

"Kim! What the…" squealed Wes as he popped up from behind his counter and

promptly fell over. "Ow! Damn it!"

"What were you doing?" Kim said, her voice shrill as she ran over to him. "Where were you?"

"Fucking hell, I was stocking the gum! I was just sitting here reading the stupid new flavor descriptions. Why are you freaking out on me?"

Sure enough, five cases of bubble gum lay scattered out in the space behind the counter, a rainbow of sugary yumminess. Kim clutched at her face and tried to get her breathing back under control. Something was definitely off today, something more than just her being spooked by weird customers – she was sure of it. Looking out, she saw that night had fully enveloped Logres, Trick Or Treating in full swing in other parts of the town.

"Okay," she said, making an exaggerated whistle and motioning wildly. "Have you had any customers since I left?"

"Yeah, Mr. Jermyn came in, just like he does every day," replied Wes as he got up off the floor. "Bought his two lottery tickets and bottle of root beer, just like he does every day! What is going on?"

"Where's Maria? Or Dwight? Have you seen Dwight?"

Wes rubbed his elbow where he had fallen. "No, neither. Why are you spazzing?"

Kim looked up at the large digital clock that was above the far counter that held all the tobacco products. It was only a quarter after seven. Thru-Drug closed at ten. The last three hours would not be able to pass fast enough.

"You saw that fat guy, right Wes?" she said in a quiet voice.

"Yeah…" Wes replied, slowly.

"Angie saw the old lady with me. Maria saw an old man. Only… only I saw the little boy."

"What are you talking about?"

Kim gave her head a hard little shake. "I need to go find Maria and Angie. Shit, and Dwight. Just… just don't leave here, okay? Please?"

Wes's face was unreadable. "Gotcha, Kim."

Going back the way she had just come, down the aisle of medical supplies, Kim found she was hugging herself. She had put on a long-sleeved black thermal underneath her red Thru-Drug polo, and while she had been fine earlier, she was sweating now. Of course, her gesture was one of psychological comfort not temperature. Realizing how shaken she had become, she paused to pull out her hairband and tie her long black tresses back up in a tighter ponytail. Flicking a loose strand behind her ear, Kim took three more steps to scan down the second perpendicular aisle, hoping she didn't see anyone surprising.

Anyone, no. Anything…

Something was on the floor, a mess of some kind. It was a few aisles in, between pet supplies and children's. Something spilled? Kim's sense of job duty and her innate human instinct to investigate the curious led her to walk forward. Not even twenty feet away, right along the end display of dog collars and matching leashes. Right on the floor where anyone could step in it.

The smell hit her first, thick and warm. A pile of feces had been strewn out, the perpetrator squatting, leaving his mess, and then playing in his own shit. Defecating on

the floor in the middle of the store would be bad enough, but that someone would then paint and mold their steaming delight seemed an abomination. The worst offense was the art itself, some abstraction or symbol that struck Kim more horrid than the stench.

She backed away, gagging and eyes watering from the fetid stink, or perhaps from what the befouled lump had been shaped into. A sea of nightmare images washed through her imagination, each one more atrocious than the one before it. This wasn't the product of ill customers or Halloween pranksters. Some primal, instinctual part of Kim recognized the sigil scrawled in shit and felt her soul desecrated by the sight of it.

Running, stumbling, falling. Kim made her way back to the front of the store. She crawled the last few feet around the corner to bring her head up and find Wes engaged in a conversation with Maria. Wes joking, Maria drinking her diet shake. Kim's voice wouldn't come, the sounds from her throat nothing more than choked bleats. She coughed, once then harder. *Get up!* she told herself. Holding back an urge to be sick, she pulled herself up by the metal shell that held shopping baskets.

"Holy shit! Kim, what happened?"

Wes rushed over to her, Maria close behind. Kim yanked her eyes off them long enough to gaze at the doors. Something was in the Thru-Drug, something sadistic and perverse, something diseased and hungry. She could feel it now, behind her eyes and low in her stomach.

As she came to these conclusions, a scream tore out from the back end of the store.

"Joyce! Was that Joyce?" asked Wes.

"Ohmigod, what's going on?" yelped Maria.

Kim looked back to the doors and let out a small groan. Angie stood there now, having appeared out of nowhere, looking nothing less than an incarnate of hell. Her glasses shattered, but the frames still hanging on to her pallid face, her hair was streaked back with filth and her eyes had been gorged out. In the hollow sockets, a visceral blackness oozed like hot tar, the same bubbling and running from her mouth. An arm raised, one that looked irreparably broken, and Kim saw that the liquid blackness squirmed under the skin of her extended digits as well.

Maria had spun at the Kim's sound of terror, and she too had screamed. However, Maria had then taken off as fast as she could scramble past the cash register counters. Angie's head snapped with the motion and her arm tracked Maria's movement. Glittering shards, obsidian-like and sharp, projected themselves from Angie's stretched arm and toppled Maria into a display of cleaning supplies. The pharmacy tech howled in agony as Angie very calmly glided over to her, those wet black orifices never leaving Kim and Wes. Her neck cracked, head twisting one hundred and eighty degrees to watch them behind her. Retrieving a bleeding, sobbing Maria and dragging her shuddering form along the floor, Kim trembled when she registered that the projectile spikes had been Angie's own fingers.

"Angie, hon?" Wes tried as she came upon them. "Can you hear me? Please, you in there?"

No response, no show of any emotion. Still gripping Maria by the collar, Angie tilted her head in the direction of the back of the store. It was slow, but quite deliberate. Neither Kim nor Wes moved. A slight crease in the brow. Angie peered at the space between them and the door and, without warning, violently vomited a massive amount of

the seeping darkness. The others screamed, and Kim began to pull Wes away when the discharge started to reform into the symbol she had seen back farther in the store.

Herded by their captor, Kim and Wes did their best to help Maria along. One of Angie's fingers had punctured the back of her left thigh and walking was near impossible. Mostly carrying her down the aisle, Kim couldn't help but eye the medical supplies that lined the shelves, but she didn't dare pause to retrieve anything. Not that it would matter. She had seen the sigil scrawled in shit and felt what it represented. None of them were going to survive tonight, and if anything, she should try for any item on the shelves that would allow her to take her own life as quickly as possible. Maria continued to bleed and weep, blubbering an occasional prayer while Wes just stared blankly, the shock too much for him to fully absorb. Kim wondered which of them would get slaughtered first.

Rounding the last corner in the store, they found Joyce cowering under a shelf of boxed wine. She was shaking uncontrollably, eyes wide and staring off. The large puddle underneath her form drove home her fear. Kim's heart lurched, and she surged forward only to then follow the older woman's line of sight to the doorway of the stockroom. Kim fell to her knees, a scream lost in the madness she was seeing, and found by Maria behind her.

Once it had been all of them. The old lady, the fat man, the little boy, the elderly man… even a teenage girl and a toddler. Once. Now they had stripped down to their barest, truest forms and all congealed together like animal fat cooling in a frying pan. A single, quivering bulbous entity, it hummed with a black cellulite frequency not meant to be experienced. From holes and digits, midnight rivulets of living corruption writhed and undulated. One had clasped onto the corpse of Dr. Homme by the leg, her skull smashed in, and was drawing it closer to its mass. Dwight was already half-consumed, his legs already devoured and his flabby torso hanging upside-down up of its center. The stockboy's dead eyes were already twitching with black flecks.

Wes deposited Maria over by Joyce, then helped Kim up as Angie moved almost gracefully over to the hulking monstrosity. With her good hand, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a boxcutter, a tool used so often when on receiving duty. Liquid black eyes turned to examine them all in turn as she extended the blade, Wes's mouth opening as if he were going to protest whatever action she had in mind. But Angie was no longer "in mind," and the employees watched aghast as she deeply split open Dwight's unconsumed belly. The horizontal gash began to bleed, and Angie cut again and again until he looked ready to be disemboweled, a few bits on entrails hanging out. Then, her act completed, she stepped back and lowered head almost reverently.

"What the…" tried Wes, as the gaping wound began to shift.

"Go ahead," came a voice from Dwight's bloody torso.

It was voice as black as the night sky, warm as newly spilled blood and as sweet as rotting apples. Kim felt it tickle between her legs as it spit pus on her heart. The four assembled merely gawked in abject horror.

"Go ahead," it said again. "Ask."

"What?" Wes managed to feebly get out.

"Hmmm… almost. You scurrying mammals always ask the same things. Questions to quantify and qualify. 'What, how, why?' There are no answers. Perhaps it's all pointless."

"What?" Wes blathered again.

It laughed, wet and malicious. "Such small things, so scared. All you have are moments."

One of the blackened tendrils shot up and then plummeted down into Dr. Homme's damaged head. It began to suck the flesh out in a meaty grind, its own disease left in wake. The carcass seizured and began to void fluids and waste. A second dark tentacle came to lap up the spillage. Kim covered her mouth and nose to hold back a gag.

"Ah, it doesn't matter, remember?" it said.

Kim's eyes shot up.

"Now, which of you will be the betrayer? Who among you will abandon your friends and escape? Which of you would be free?"

"None of…" began Wes.

Kim spun and fled.

Behind, she heard Wes scream something, then she heard him *really* scream. She kept running. She skirted the vomited symbol as Maria's voice was added and the bubbling, malevolent laughter overcame everything. Kim bolted out the doors, she herself now screaming and sobbing. Outside, the sudden chill and relative calm of the night was like a slap in the face.

She paused only for a second, then kept running. She had left her purse inside, so she didn't have her cars keys. Didn't have her apartment keys, money, license, anything. It didn't matter. *It doesn't matter!* Kim started laughing hysterical just as tears kept coming. She could run forever, but it would be pointless, right? That… thing could find her if it wanted. It could be tomorrow or in forty years or never. Or she could be hit by a freakin' bus next week.

Kim collapsed by the side of road, giggling in between her sobs. She hadn't really escaped, it had just wanted to see her damned and broken. While she might be alive, she had seen behind the curtain and was now damaged by the knowledge gained. *It doesn't matter!* She babbled to herself, over and over, eventually biting her tongue so bad that blood drained from her mouth. *It doesn't matter!*

There on a length of grass along a state route in Logres, Ohio, a young woman lay with a violated psyche, her presence undetected for sometime until a passing driver called 9-11. There were no bodies found at the Thru-Drug store, no scenes of violence, no questions ever answered. None of the employees present that night, save Kim Reynolds, were ever seen again. She never said a word, because she knew the truth. She knew that monsters had been out Trick Or Treating that evening and would do so again anytime they wished. She knew she had been given a few extra moments, as ruined as they were, and that in the end…

… it didn't matter.

THE WOLFMAN'S WIFE
Sarah E. Adkins

Sarah E. Adkins earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing/Poetry from Chatham University in 2008, and a Bachelor of Arts in Writing from the University of Mount Union in 2003. She has published poems in *Babelfruit*, *Plainspoke, The Pittsburgh Quarterly Online*, and *Istanbul Literature Review,* as well as publishing reviews in *Fourth River.* Sarah lives in Ohio with her three cats, and enjoys skateboarding, Martial Arts, calligraphy, and making collages.

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Alexandra Grayson pushed the old Subaru slightly over the speed limit to get to the grocery store, and her pace walking in was quicker than any of the other store patrons. She practically threw items into her cart and when she had everything she needed, her eyes scanned the available check out lines for the quickest option. She chose to use the self-checkout machine, but was behind an elderly woman who was moving very slowly.

"Here, let me help you," Alex forced a smile.

"Oh, thank you, dear," the old woman patted her hand and let Alex scan her items for her and bag them up.

Timothy Greyson finished stuffing a change of clothes into his gym bag, along with soap and shampoo, towels, a toothbrush and toothpaste. He zipped the bag and threw it over his shoulder and began pacing back and forth across the kitchen. He grabbed a banana from the counter and peeled it, took a few bites, then tossed the rest in the trash. Timothy looked at the clock on the microwave. He looked out the window. He let out his breath he didn't know he'd been holding when he saw the Subaru pull into the drive way.

Alex pulled the grocery bags out of the hatchback and walked towards the two-bedroom-one-bathroom ranch house she shared with her husband of two years, Tim. Timothy met her half ways and grabbed more than half of the grocery bags and carried them inside. "What took so long? It's almost time."

"Well, hello to you, too," Alex began putting away the cold groceries. "I made it in plenty of time. Besides, I got stuck behind an old lady in the checkout line," she offered.

"Well, that's just great. I'm sure the neighbors would understand that. 'Well, I'm sorry you were eaten by my husband, but I got stuck in line at the grocery store. If only it weren't for that old lady, I would have made it on time. But I just had to get...."Timothy pulled an item from the nearest grocery bag. "' I Can't Believe it's Not Butter". Yes, don't you just love Fabio? Sorry about your dog. Fido was my husband's appetizer when he turned into a were...'"

Alex cut him off by jingling the car keys inches from his face. "Just go now, or you'll be the one making excuses." She smiled at him, but her eyes betrayed her weariness.

"Right, dear." Timothy grabbed the keys in his left hand and kissed Alex on the

cheek. He pulled back and looked at his wife. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

She swatted him on the behind as he went out the door. No sooner had the door closed than it opened again and Tim poked his head in. “Lock the door,” he said, “there’s a bad moon on the rise.” He wiggled his eyebrows and pulled the door shut behind him. Alex heard the motor starting as she turned the deadbolt and then turned back to the groceries. She paused in her task to turn on the lights in the kitchen and living room, and then walked back to the master bedroom and turned those lights on as well. She flipped the television on to the evening news and resumed putting away the groceries.

Alex looked out the kitchen window at the moon. She pursed her lips together and turned to heat up the kettle for tea. Her body froze rigid when she heard a noise from the front of the house. She grabbed the biggest thing she could see at the moment, a large metal spatula, and tiptoed to check it out. The floorboards creaked as Alex approached the area she thought the noise had come from. She froze again. She felt a slight breeze. The front window was open a crack and the blinds were banging against the pane. Alex let out the breath she didn’t know she’d been holding and shut and locked the window. She felt silly when she let out a little scream when the kettle whistled. She admonished herself and went to pour the water on the tea bag in her favorite mug. It was the mug she’d gotten at the ski lodge where she’d first met Tim. She settled on the couch with her cup of tea and watched an old movie, something with Audrey Hepburn. Before she knew it, Tim was kissing her on the cheek to wake her up. His hair was still wet from washing it. That full moon was over. Alex wrapped her arms around Tim’s neck and breathed in his scent, musk mixed with fresh soap.

The next full moon was on Halloween. Alex was actually looking forward to it because people would be out and about, and the neighborhood would be well-lit. The moon would provide extra light for the revelers. She always looked forward to seeing the kids in their costumes, too. Truth be told, Halloween was Alex’s favorite holiday as a child. She remembered her favorite costumes as a little girl: a robot when she was eight, complete with a large-pad calculator on her chest, and a sorceress when she was 10 (she thought that was particularly creative at the time). Alex had already bought candy weeks in advance, and she tucked a Reese's cup now in Tim’s pocket as he walked by.

“I’m thinking more like rabbit tonight, hon, but thanks,” he grinned, showing his white teeth.

“Oh, you’re so clever,” she admonished him, and faked a pout. It had taken a while to get used to the idea of her husband’s “hunting,” but then she thought, it wasn’t really that different than the husbands who went out with their Winchesters and Brownings. Just a little more visceral. She tried not to think about it.

Tim left the room to gather some last minute supplies, then was back in the kitchen with Alex. “Happy Halloween,” said Alex brightly.

“Mmmm,” Tim pursed his lips. “Boo!”

“You don’t scare me,” Alex said.

“Well, would you like tricks or treats when I get home,” Tim sidled up next to Alex.

“Oh, definitely treats,” she said, her voice lower.

“See you then.” With that Tim was out the door and Alex continued her Hallow’s Eve preparations. She lit the candle in the jackolantern outside, even though it wasn’t quite dusk, and flipped on the porch light. Alex had time to make herself a cup of tea before the first trick-or-treaters arrived.

There were a lot of vampires, Alex thought due to the popularity of the *Twilight* series and those that followed it, and also possibly because of the same, a lot of werewolves. She herself was firmly in the Team Jacob camp. So what if she was biased? Everytime she saw a werewolf that night, though, she couldn’t help but stifle a laugh. If only their parents knew, she thought. Then, it was a good thing they didn’t. She wondered what Tim was doing right now. Then decided she probably didn’t really want to know.

After the fifth werewolf, Tim was firmly in the front of her mind. A part of her wished she was out running in the woods with him. She used to run cross country in high school, but now subsisted on yoga and pilates, and only did those half-heartedly. Oh, she knew it was more of a curse than a gift to Tim, and he wouldn’t wish it on anyone, but sometimes she wondered about the heightened senses, the increased strength and speed and stamina, but then, there was the fur.

After the last trick-or-treater came and left, Alex blew the candle out in the Jack-o-lantern. She crawled into bed with a book, but was too tired to read. Alex slept peacefully, and when she awoke, Tim was spooning her. She sighed contentedly and rolled over to face him. Tim opened his eyes. He smiled at her, and his breath smelled fresh.

Alex put a hand over her mouth. “I have morning breath!” she exclaimed behind her hand.

Tim laughed and kissed Alex’s hand. “How was Halloween?” he asked.

“I thought of you all night,” she answered honestly.

Tim smiled again and moved Alex’s hand from in front of her mouth. He kissed her. Alex was the one smiling now. Every couple had their problems, she thought, but theirs really wasn’t so bad.

HOME INVASION
John J. Smith

Writing under two names John J. Smith and pen name Jonathan Black, the dark side of John, he has won several awards under each name and have been called a “prolific Fiction writer.” He enjoy writing romance and mainstream as John and paranormal and paranormal romance as Jonathan. Several of his novels have been converted or rewritten into screenplays; for which he has also have won several awards as well, but the most importantly, enjoys writing in the various genre. (It's the story that's written that decides who the writer is, not the writer choosing the story.) And, at last, he resides in Plano, a suburb of Dallas, Texas, and can often be found loitering at a Starbucks.

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“Don’t you just love New York during Halloween?” Steliana asked, looking over her cup of coffee to her husband.” She glanced across the patio, watching while people dressed in costumes strolled by. “I love watching the kids.”

“Hmm,” Nicolae moaned, as if the mere thought of a child brought warmth to his heart. “But to be honest, Steliana, I love New York because it’s... New York... And, I love home delivery. They just come to the door bringing delightful entrees.”

Steliana laughed, nearly choking on her after-dinner coffee. “Nicolae, I swear sometimes...” She paused for a moment, and then continued, “But to be honest I do, too. It’s so easy living in this city.”

The waitress, a very attractive twenty-something dressed as a vampire, strolled up with a coffee pot. “Can I warm that up for you?”

Nicolae smiled and raised his hands like claws and said, “Blah, I want to drink your blood.” Laughing, he then lifted his cup. “Please, and if you don’t mind me saying, you look stunning as a vampire.”

The waitress giggled. She loved the older couple and their weekly visits. They were always polite, always with compliments, and they tipped incredibly well. “I take it your after-dinner brandy has gone to your head, Mr. Balitiu?” the waitress said in her usual warm and joking manner. She looked to Steliana and continued, “Has he been watching his P’s and Q’s at home?”

Steliana nodded with a laugh that seemed to come from deep in her chest. “Yes, he’s such a pussycat, and he loves it when we come here, and although I’m quite jealous about it you know, he’s so disappointed when you’re not here. He thinks you are so delicious.”

“That’s very sweet,” the waitress said, then she kissed him on the cheek. “Can I bring you anything else? We have a wonderful chocolate cake.”

“A wheel chair,” Nicolae answered in his normal soft and joking manner. “As always, I ate too much.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, where do you live?”

“Cornerstone Manor, and let me tell you, after this meal those three blocks are going to be horrible.”

“I’ve seen your place,” the waitress said in total awe. “That is the most incredible mansion I’ve ever seen.”

"It's nice. You should come by sometime, we'd love to show you around," Steliana replied, "But it's not home." She sighed.

"That's because we lived in a castle in Romania and Steliana just cannot get used to living in a small home."

Small, the waitress wondered. *The house is larger than the apartment building I live in.* "I'd love too."

"Then it's set. Bring your friend, we'll cook out."

"I think what I miss most is the high ceilings and open air. Of course my flower garden was to die for," Steliana continued in a melancholy tone. "No, dear, I think we're full. We just can't eat like we used to," Steliana answered after a long moment, touching the young girls hand with the gentleness of a grandmother.

The waitress smiled and then moved off toward the entrance.

Across the street, Jack and Roland leaned against Jack's mustang, eyeing the elderly couple with hunger. To Jack, like all the other old fucks he's attacked, this was an easy mark if they had more cash than their monthly social security check, and by the way they were dressed he believed so.

"What do you think," Roland asked, watching the old man pull his wallet from an inside breast pocket.

"Wait for it," Jack answered.

Nicolae opened his wallet and withdrew a stack of bills about an inch thick. He then tilted his head, looking over his glasses, and fanned out the cash.

The waitress returned and stopped short when she saw the money in Nicolae's hand. "Mr. Balitiu, you shouldn't be flashing your money around like that."

"It's these damned glasses," Nicolae complained. "I can't see the denomination with these things." He looked around. "Plus it's so dark I can barely see my hands."

"Nicolae, I swear, you really need to go back to the doctors."

"Shush, woman," Nicolae spat.

The waitress quickly sat the food bill on the table, and then picked up a few bills from beneath Nicolae's trembling fingers, and covered the remaining cash with Nicolae's napkin.

"Count it out for me, would you?"

The waitress stooped beside Nicolae and whispered, "You have over a thousand dollars here..." She took a hundred and put it on her tray. "Now put that back in your wallet and put your wallet away. I'll be back with your change in a moment."

"This is for you, dear," Steliana said, sliding another hundred dollar bill over to her. "And you keep the change from the bill."

"I can't—"

"Yes, you can. And, you will," Steliana said. She then nodded in Nicolae's direction, "I think he has a crush on you."

The waitress laughed and then helped Nicolae to his feet. "You two be very careful going home, and please don't carry so much cash on you. There are people here who would really hurt you for that kind of money."

Nicolae kissed the waitress on the cheek. "You are just so nice." He blew out a sigh. "You remind me so much of our Anna." He dabbed at his eyes, and then coughed as if clearing a horrible knot of remembrance. "I'm looking forward to you and your boyfriend to come by, did I say that correctly, my English you know. Royalty teaches you

things but..."

"Your English is perfect," the waitress said as she lightly swept her hand across his shoulder and back.

Nicolae then held out a trembling hand to Steliana. "Allow me, my dear," and he held her hand as she stood.

Across the street Jack whistled. "You see the fucking money he has in his wallet. "Fuck me. He was advertising it."

"Fuck no. I was looking at the young bitch sitting with him... Damn, son, that's the hottest thing I've ever seen..." Roland answered, then more to himself he continued, "I'm going to break me off a piece of that."

Jack gave Roland a look that said he had shit for brains and bad eyes. "Fuck, man, you didn't hit the pipe did you?"

"Nah, man," Roland defended. He stopped, "Where'd the young babe go?"

Jack looked at him and started to say something but then thought better of it and looked back at the old man. "This is going to be fuckin' easy."

They watched as the elderly couple strolled across the patio. Then Nicolae stopped and glanced at the two guys and uttered something, which made Steliana take pause before walking a little faster.

"Fuck," Jack mumbled, "they might be on to us." Jack bounced off the car and slapped Roland on the chest. "Let's go, then it's in and out, mofo, in and out," and they followed the elderly couple who walked somewhat hastily hand in hand down the street.

Nicolae stopped at the bottom of the steps and drew in a deep breath. He dabbed beads of perspiration from his forehead and looked up at the entrance. "Five steps never looked so high."

"After the walk we just had," Steliana said. "Those piddly steps are nothing." She then took his arm and helped him up the steps.

At the door, Nicolae hesitated before unlocking it. "I think we were being followed."

"I think so, too, dear, let's hurry inside before something happens."

He nodded and said, "Yes, yes, before something happens," and shoved the key into the lock and gently pushed the door open.

She paused for a moment, "I'm still thinking about that lovely waitress, do you think she'll stop by?"

"One can hope." He stepped out of the way and let Steliana in. He said, "Don't forget the alarm, dear."

As Jack and Roland were rushing toward the steps, Steliana pressed in the code, disarming the alarm, and as Nicolae pushed on the door to close it, Jack banged through, slamming into Nicolae.

Nicolae crashed down with a loud yelp and before Steliana could turn to help her husband, Roland slammed into her, hurling her into the front room parlor. She crashed down on a center table with a loud scream that silenced before she hit the floor.

"Shut the fucking door, Ro," Jack yelled out, and then kicked Nicolae in the face. "Lay still you old fuck or I'll kick you back to wherever you came from."

"Steliana," Nicolae moaned. "Please don't hurt her. She's not well."

"From the looks of it grandpa, you ain't looking so fucking hot yourself," said

Jack with a laugh and a grin that made Nicolae lay back. “Much better grandpa. Make this easy for us, okay.”

Roland, laughing as he bolted the front door, shouted, “Fucking grandma must weight twenty pounds. I barely laid a fucking hand on her and she went flying.”

“Please,” Nicolae pleaded, “take what you want and leave.”

“What I *want* is the hot bitch that was with you at dinner,” Jordan shouted, “where the fuck is she!”

Nicolae sat up and Jack dropped down and slammed his fist in Nicolae’s face, two, three times, before the old man fell back, unconscious.

“Some people just don’t fucking listen,” said Jack as he reached inside Nicolae’s jacket and pulled out his wallet. He flipped the wallet opened and whistled, “Mother-fucker is carrying nothing but hundred dollar bills. Must be a couple thousand here.”

“Fucking foreigners. They come over here and take our shit and they’re rich to begin with,” Roland said, looking down at Nicolae. “Damned, dude, you did your Ranger thang on his ass. He’s out cold.”

Jack stood, ripped the money out and shoved it in his jean pocket, and then rummaged through the wallet, pulling out a handful of credit cards. “Man, this old fuck is loaded.” He threw the wallet over to Roland, laughing. “You’re into wallets. Tuck that baby in your pocket, you might like it.”

“Fuckin’ A, man, looks like real leather,” Roland said while he looked through the wallet, dropping papers and cards, and then shoved it into his back pocket. “Nothin’ like a souvenir to take home.”

Jack looked into what looked to be formal dining room and eyed a huge pair of silver candlesticks and a set of gold flatware. He whistled, then snapped at Roland, “Check in on granny, then let’s spread out. As old as this fucking place is they have to have shit we can hock.”

As Roland turned toward the parlor, Nicolae grabbed at his ankle. “You leave her alone!”

In a panic, Roland turned, and bam, bam, shot Nicolae in the chest.

“What the fuck? People’ll hear that shit,” Jack shouted just beneath Steliana’s scream. She was standing at the parlor door, clutching her heart, screaming.

“Motherfucker grabbed me, man, what was I supposed to do?” Roland defended. “We gotta pop their asses anyway. Can’t have no witnesses, right?”

Steliana ran for Nicolae and Roland grabbed her by her hair and proceeded to pistol-whip her down to the floor. “Stay down, bitch, or you get two in the head.” Steliana didn’t move. She lay looking at Nicolae, crying, trying to reach out to him.

Jack grumbled something and then grabbed Nicolae by the ankles and dragged him down a long hallway to the kitchen. “Take care of grandma, asshole, and no more fucking shooting. Fuck, before you know it the cops will be breaking down the fucking door.”

Roland protested in his defense as he grabbed Steliana by the ankles and dragged her down the hallway. As she moved, her jacket opened and her dressed hiked up and Roland froze. “Mother fuck! Look at this bitch. She’s got the fucking body of a thirty year old...” He looked at her legs, thighs, and then his eyes rested on her crotch. She had the best-looking body he had ever seen. Her thighs were milky white and shone of silk. Her stomach was flat, her crotch, tantalizing. “Damn dude...” He gasped and licked his

lips. “She ain’t wearing grannie panties...” In the heat of the moment he dropped down to his knees and ripped open her blouse, and drew in another deep breath. Her full breast looked firm and inviting. He had never seen anything that looked like this that wasn’t on the screen or in a magazine. He straddled her and groped her breasts with both hands. He wanted her so badly he couldn’t stand the moment.

He then looked up at her face and jumped up, wide eyed. She looked twenty, thirty years younger than she did five minutes ago. “I gotta break me off a piece of this before we leave,” he whispered, drooling. He dry-washed his face as he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He had taken a few hits from the crack pipe while sitting in the Mustang and had one helluva buzz but he had never had anything like this happen to him before, the bitch had to be real. She just had to.

“Have at it butthead; if you like old meat. But first the money and jewels. And those fucking candlesticks, knives, all that shit.”

Roland knelt down and squeezed her breasts, and immediately got an erection. He put the pistol beneath her chin and dug in. “You stay here nice and quiet and you live. You move...”

Steliana nodded, then moved as if inviting him down. She then looked at his crotch as he stood and a shiver went down Roland’s back. He uttered, “What the...”

“Ro! Quit fucking with her,” Jack shouted. He opened a door and looked in. It was pitch black. The reflection from the kitchen lights disappeared at the door and Jack hesitated for a long breath before he took a cautious step to the door. He felt the left wall, looking for a switch all the while thinking he’d lose his hand if he didn’t hurry. He felt the switch, flipped it on, and a soft glow appeared at the bottom of the steps. “All right! Fucking basement.” He lifted Nicolae and dropped him down the steps—boom, boom, boom—echoed as Nicolae went down and then rested at the bottom of the steps. Jack turned the light off, shut the door, and when he turned, Roland was standing over Steliana as if in a trance, mumbling and licking his lips, rubbing his crotch, playing with himself.

Jack grabbed Roland and slammed him against the wall. “Wake up asshole.”

Roland blinked as if he was coming out of a trance, and when he looked back down, he was looking at an eighty-year-old woman. “What the...” He looked at Jack. “Something ain’t right here, man, let’s bolt.”

“What?”

“We got his wallet man. Let’s get the fuck outta here!” Roland shouted in a manner that almost resembled a scream. Somehow, she had taken his badass attitude. He knew it. She was doing this to him.

“I ain’t leaving until we clean this place out, got it!”

“Nah, man, shit, this place is fucking with us!”

“It’s all in your fucking head. I told you not to toke on that pipe,” Jack said while pushing Roland down the hall in the direction to the staircase they saw when they came in. “If that old fuck had that kind of cash in his wallet, you know he has more upstairs.”

Roland armed beads of sweat from his forehead, and when Jack grabbed his arm to pull him up the steps, he stopped. “What the fuck is with you, Ro, get your ass upstairs.”

“I don’t want to… man, I want to get out of here... It ain’t the dope, it’s this place, it’s her, she’s fucking with me.” Jack didn’t answer, he merely stared at Roland as if he could do him now. “I’m cool, Jack... I’m cool,” Roland said, holding up his hands. He

looked back down to Steliana and mumbled, “I’m cool...”

Jack pushed passed him and took two steps at a time. Suddenly scared out his mind, Roland ran up the stairs, catching up with Jack at the top. He turned and looked down, half expecting to see granny standing at the bottom looking up at him and beckoning him to come back down.

He exhaled a sigh of relief. He knew if she were standing at the bottom of the steps he’d have a heart attack.

“Ro, man, you look like you seen a fucking ghost, get with it man,” Jack snapped, bringing Roland back from another trance.

Roland then followed Jack into a room that looked as if it were an office. A huge mahogany desk stood in the middle of the room. Behind the desk were shelves lined with books, and off to the right was a safe. The picture that typically hung in front of the safe was on the floor and leaning against the wall. The door to the safe was left open. Inside were stacks of what looked to be money.

Jack bounded to the safe and when he looked inside, he couldn’t believe his eyes. There were stacks and stacks of hundreds and fifties that filled the back half of the safe. The front half contained a wooden box and when Jack opened it he exclaimed, “Fuck me, dude, we hit the motherfucking mother lode.” He looked back to Roland and paused. Roland’s eyes were wide as if he had just met the Grim Reaper. Jack pushed him on the shoulder, “Dude, did you hear me? There must be thousands of dollars in cash and jewels, go find me something to dump this shit in.” But Roland didn’t move, couldn’t move, it was as if rigor mortis had settled in. “Jesus-fucking-Christ, Ro, get a fucking grip.”

“He ain’t gonna help us,” Roland mumbled in a hypnotic tone. “We’re fucking dead men.”

“Ah, fuck you,” Jack snapped and then pushed past him. “I ought’a pop a cap in your ass and leave you here...”

All the while Jack was gone, Roland stood nearly frozen in the same spot he stood in when Jack was rummaging through the safe. He looked around the room and chill bumps chased chill bumps across his scalp and down his back and arms. He shivered with fear. He mumbled, “They’re playing with us...”

“I can’t believe this,” Jack ranted when he came back into the office. “Grandma has more goddamned jewelry than the queen of fuckin’ England.” He opened a pillowcase for Roland to look into but Roland refused to move. He kept looking around the room like a kid’s first visit to a toy store.

Jack pushed past him and went to the safe and grabbed the wooden box and dropped it in the pillowcase, then proceeded to dump the stacks of money.

Finished, Jack turned to Roland and asked, “What’s your problem?”

“I don’t know, man, I feel like someone is watching.”

Jack strolled off, looking around the room. He didn’t see anything. The place was empty. He then looked for hidden doors, pictures with holes, cameras, but he didn’t see anything other than a typical home office like the hundreds he had broken into. “Nada, dude. You must be getting a slight touch of paranoia since you eyed granny.”

“Let’s get the fuck out of here. This place is giving me the creeps.”

“Let’s check out the rest of the rooms, *then* we’re out of here,” Jack answered.

On the way out of the office, they dumped a few items that looked of value into

the pillowcase.

When Jack turned to go to the back of the house, Roland grabbed his arm and said, “We have enough. I’m telling you, let’s go.”

Jack hesitated for a beat. Then said, “All right. Let’s roll.” As they were walking down the steps, Jack said, “You gotta pop grandma. No witnesses, dude.”

Roland didn’t respond. As he walked down the steps, he kept his eyes down. He didn’t want to see anything appear that wasn’t really there.

At the bottom of the steps, Roland felt something pass by him. He spun around as if he’d been touched, and grabbed his pistol from the small of his back and slung it out, but there wasn’t anyone there to shoot at. He swung around again and pointed the pistol between Jack’s eyes.

“Whoa!” Jack shouted and ducked out of the way. “What the fuck, dude!”

“There, there, there was someone there. I felt him, her, it.”

Jack eased Roland’s arm down. “Get a grip, Ro, and put the fuckin’ gun away before you get us killed...”

Roland put the gun in his pants at the small of his back, and turned in a circle a couple of times before being convinced they were alone. He just couldn’t shake the feeling that they were *not* alone in the hallway. He couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being stalked. Something was with them, breathing down his neck. He felt it. Like tiny insects crawling across his neck. It felt like his sister’s cat, always staring at him as if he wanted to eat him. He hated that damned thing. He hated this place. And he hated Jack for not listening.

“Come on, let’s wrap this up,” Jack whispered. He then started down the hall. Roland hesitated for a beat, waiting to see if he felt that hot misty breath on his neck again, then followed Jack to the kitchen.

When they arrived in the kitchen, Steliana was lying on the floor, looking at the door with a deadpan expression until Roland stepped in. She smiled up at him and he froze with an expression that said he had to have her.

“What the fuck, Ro, I thought you wanted out.”

After a couple beats, Roland responded, “I know man, but damn, I can’t seem to help myself. I *gotta* break me off a piece of that.”

“Then drag her ancient ass upstairs, do your thing, then pop her,” Jack said with a look of disgust. “I’ll go through down here and see if there’s anything else we can take...” He shook his head and continued, “We hit the mother lode and this asshole loses it...”

Just as Roland bent over to pick up Steliana, the basement door groaned out a long drawn out screech and both men stared at the door for a long beat before Roland whispered, “You go do your Ranger thang one more time, and this time you pop him in the head. I’ll take care of grandma.”

Jack started for the door. “No witnesses, Ro.”

Roland bent down again to pick up Steliana and froze. He could have sworn her mouth and nose had been bleeding, but now it was as if she had never been hit. Furthermore, there wasn’t a drop of blood on her or her clothes. He turned to Jack but Jack was already going down the steps, and when he turned back to Steliana, she clamped her eyes shut, feigning unconsciousness.

“Okay, grandma, I know you’re awake.” She grinned. “All well and good, grandma. Up on your feet.”

Steliana reached out her hand and while Roland pulled her to her feet she said, “I’ll do anything you want, just please don’t hurt me.”

“I know you will, grandma, now hoof it up the steps.”

She turned and started down the hall. “Just to let you know, I’ve never had kids.”

Jack stopped at the bottom of the steps, stunned. There was no old man lying at the bottom of the steps. “What the...” He stepped deeper into the basement and was taken aback. The room was empty of the old man and anything else that could have been shoved in a basement, but what made the room look peculiar was that it was totally black; floor, walls, ceiling, with just the single bulb in the center of the room. He took another step and realized that he didn’t have a shadow.

He turned in a circle. No shadow. No old man. Nothing but utter loneliness. But then again, out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw something, a bed, no, a... a... table, maybe, something, and he stepped in that direction. When he got to where he thought he saw something, nothing was there, but then at the far wall he saw the same piece of something.

Then he could smell it. The same smell when someone owned an animal and never bathed them. Like an old blanket that has never been washed.

He walked in the direction of the stench and found nothing but he knew something was here. He reached out and then jerked his hand back. He felt something he was sure, but...

He shook his head, mumbling, “What the... Like some fucking carnival funhouse...”

Then he felt something flutter by him and he spun around. “Goddamn,” Jack grunted.

He waited.

Nothing.

“Fuck, man, I’m starting to act like that asshole upstairs.” Then he stuck his hand out but couldn’t see it, but on the other side of where his fingers should have been he thought he saw a face.

The face moved.

Startled, Jack jumped back, readying himself for some sort of an attack, but as before, nothing happened. Then the face moved again, and just as he started to follow the face, the door creaked and stopped with the metal clink of a deadbolt.

He pounded up the steps.

Jack banged on the door but it wasn’t budging. As best as he could, he kicked at it but the door merely groaned.

“Roland!” Jack shouted out. Nothing. He knew Roland was up on the second floor and couldn’t hear him but he shouted out again, banging on the door, trying with all his might to break through.

The light bulb winked out and darkness at once rushed up the steps. Jack slammed back against the door, waiting for something, anything to attack him. Like Roland, he could feel it and was pissed he didn’t listen to him but the money was too good and these old fucks should have been easy. After several breaths, Jack forced himself to relax. Hell, he had been through much more on his tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. “This is a fucking a

cake walk," Jack mumbled as he twisted the doorknob. The knob didn't turn. The door was not opening.

He felt a puff of air as if thrown from the flapping wings of a bird and screamed out, "Holy fuck!" and threw his arms up to cover his face.

Then, in the instant of a blink of an eye, something took a bite out of his arm. He screamed out as he toppled down the steps as if thrown.

He lay on the cold black floor and felt something move across his back. The weight was unbearable. Paralyzes crept in when he felt the breath of something on his neck and the low guttural growl in his right ear.

He screamed out.

Roland pushed Steliana backwards toward the bed. "Please don't hurt me," Steliana moaned. "I promise, I'll do anything you want, just don't hurt me." Steliana fell back onto the bed and quickly rolled to her stomach as if hiding her face would stop the crazed man standing over her. In an instant, the eighty-year-old ass turned into a thirty-year-old ass. The grannie panties turned into a T-Back thong. The wrinkles and dimples of age faded into the milky-white silkiness that had drawn him to her in the beginning. She purred.

"I just need to break off a little piece..." he whimpered. "I have got to have some." He jerked her over on her back and stepped back. Again, she appeared thirty or more years younger. Her beauty trapped him in a hypnotic state and he couldn't move.

She smiled up at him and slowly opened her legs, inviting him in.

"Wipe that fucking smile off your face, bitch—" he pulled his pistol, "—or I'll fucking shoot you here and now and take it anyway before you go cold," Roland snapped in desperation. The trance pulled at him, even as his will to flee screamed in his head.

"I thought you wanted me," Steliana seductively moaned. "I want you. I want to do you. I want to taste you." She smiled, then purred while asking, "Don't you want me?"

Breaking from his struggle, he screamed and raised the pistol and mere seconds before he could pull the trigger he felt something behind him. He spun and fired but there was nothing there. Then he bounded back, startled, as if something had brushed by him. He jerked to his right and fired another shot that disappeared into an antique highboy. He felt it again and jerked left, and fired another shot that slammed into the wall.

Behind him, Steliana continued in her purr-like fashion, "Come on, baby, take me, take me. I want to feel you, do you, taste you..."

Roland spun back around and Steliana was standing on the bed, naked, but now she was golden tan, the perfect vision of wont.

He screamed out and fired the remaining bullets into the ceiling as something bit the back of his neck and shoulder.

The basement door creaked and Jack bolted up the steps. He stumbled and fell a couple of times before he reached the door but then hit the door full force. The door was open, and he banged through, slamming into the adjacent wall, and nearly stumbled back down the steps. He dropped to his knees, stunned from the impact.

He looked at his arm and screamed when he saw the big chunk missing. The pain flared and burned, jerking tears to his eyes. Blood ran the length of his arm and dripped from his fingertips. He reached back to his neck and winced from the pain, and when he

looked at his hand it was drenched in blood. He mumbled, “What the fuck...”

He crawled up the wall and stood looking at the basement door, waiting for a large animal or something to come bounding through and finish him off.

Then the breath from fluttering wings swept his face and when he turned toward it, something bit a large chunk out of his cheek. He cried and, flailing his arms, he ran down the hallway for the front door.

Upstairs, he heard Roland scream out but he ran as hard as he could to the front door and within a foot or so from the door he flipped over backwards as if clotheslined and slammed down on his shoulder with a menacing crunch of broken bones.

He screamed out Roland’s name all the while Roland was screaming out his name. He then heard Steliana call out, “Come on, baby, take me, take me. I want to feel you, do you, taste you...”

He slowly rolled onto his stomach and pulled his knees beneath him, and when he looked up Nicolae was looking down at him. Like Steliana, Nicolae looked to be thirty years old.

Nicolae looked down at Jack with a menacing grin that sent new chills through Jack’s body.

“Ro killed you, man. I saw it. I saw you take two to the chest.”

Nicolae reached down, grasped Jack’s arm and pulled him to his knees. “No. He shot a helpless old man—” he chuckled, “—mere bullets can’t stop us...”

“What the! Who are you?” Jack shrieked. “What are you?”

“Did I hear your friend say you were a Ranger?” Jack didn’t answer. “I hope not, because you can’t even take on an old man.” Nicolae lifted Jack off the floor and threw him against the wall. As Jack was sliding down, Nicolae took another nasty bite out of Jack’s neck and then bolted up the steps. Midway up, Nicolae disappeared in a puff of red mist.

Lying on the floor, Jack screamed out. The pain was excruciating. He could barely move but drained every bit of energy he had and crawled toward the door, and when his hand plopped down in Nicolae’s blood, Jack screamed out and jerked his hand up as if he had put his hand in acid. He looks at his hand and there was smoke steaming from the burn. The pain and tears blurred his vision and he dropped down face down. “Roland!”

Then he saw the pillowcase, its booty calling out to him, and crawled across the floor, all the while thinking of his crack pipe. *I can do this*, he thought, *I can do this...*

Roland was lying on the floor, crying. His body was covered with bites as if Steliana tried to dine on him but couldn’t finish. When Roland looked up, he saw Nicolai and Steliana looking down at him, smiling.

“Trick or treat”, Steliana quipped and Roland pushed back, pulling the trigger of his empty pistol. For a brief moment he saw something he had never seen in his life. A creature that looked half-human, half-feline. The head was bald with small pointy ears. The eyes, red and lash-less, and with no eyebrows. The mouth had long thick fangs that dipped of drool and blood beneath a small cat-like snout. He cried out to God, but God didn’t answer.

“He must not like your costume, darling,” Nicolae joked.

Still trying to scoot across the floor, Roland shouted out, “What the fuck are you,

vampires?"

"Don't be a silly boy. There is no such thing as vampires," Steliana answered as she slowly moved toward him. Blood dripped from beneath her chin. She licked her lips as an animal would do after a feast. She purred as she took another step closer. "Mmmm. You taste absolutely delicious."

"Damn Bram. He has caused our people trouble throughout the world with his silly stories of vampires," Nicolae joked. He then turned into the beast for one brief moment only to watch the fear take over the helpless man. "A vampire doesn't toy with its prey."

"We're Strigoi's," Steliana continued. "We never settle for just blood."

"Nothing is ever wasted in this house," Nicolae said as he crept closer and closer.

Roland pulled the trigger of his empty pistol as if willing the thing full.

Stranded in the corner, Roland wet himself, and Steliana laughed. "Bad, boy, look at the mess you just made."

"Fuck you," Roland replied in deep fear and anger.

"Oh, you wanted to, yes you did. You wanted it so badly you'd forgotten why you came here."

"Humans are like that," Nicolae said with a growl. "Short attention spans. Short term goals." He growled and stepped closer.

Roland clutched at his chest, murmuring, "Fuck you," over and over as Nicolae crept even closer. The drool from Nicolae's mouth sent a new shiver to Roland's loins and he wet himself again.

Like their cousins, the cat, they toyed with their prey.

"Uh-oh," Steliana looked to the door. "You should go downstairs and do that Ranger thing." She looked back to Roland and explained, "Some folks say Strigoi's are troubled souls of the dead rising from the grave. However, some of us can be living people with, as you can see, certain magical properties. Some of the characteristics of the Strigoi include the ability to transform into an animal, invisibility, and the propensity to drain the vitality of victims by drinking their blood."

"Or, as I like to say, the loss of limb," Nicolae continued with his menacing grin. He turned to Steliana and said, "You're looking beautiful, my dear."

"Thank you, dear. Do you think we should explain that Bram got his idea of the vampire from your grandfather?" She turned back to Roland as she continued talking to Nicolae, "You have to try him, dear. Marinated in alcohol for years, he's simply delicious."

"I prefer the taste of aged crack cocaine myself." Nicolae looked at the door, then back to Steliana. "Don't kill him until I get back."

"We're doing Roland first," Steliana asked but never taking her eyes off Roland.

"Oh, yes."

"Mmmm. Trick or treat."

"Jaaaaack!" Roland screamed out a second before the cat-like monster pounced.

GROWING UP GRUESOME
Jonathan Dukestein

Jonathan Dukestein does not exist. When he's not pretending to be real, he's off somewhere in a Great Lake State, probably chain smoking. This fake person spends a considerable amount of time writing, reading, painting and imagining bizarre worlds to inhabit. Chances are, he's off his medications again.

***

It was only October 26th, still enough time for Andrew to find a costume, but he was growing frantic. Every idea he had come up with had been vetoed by the parents, and every idea the parents had come up with had been dumb. A cowboy? A pirate? A clown? Optimus Prime? *Dumb!* They didn't seem to realize how important a decision this was for an eight year old.

Erin, five years older than him, had been no help at all. She had been too busy fighting with them about going to some party on Friday night. They thought she shouldn't go, that she was too young for a "boys and girls party." There had been a lot of screaming, especially from Erin. Andrew knew that she just wanted to go so she could sneak off and kiss Mike Adamson. Andrew thought Mike Adamson had really big ears.

Outside a car alarm started ringing, and Andrew peered out his bedroom window. The suburban sprawl of Logres, Ohio disappeared into the forest farther south, and the edge of the shopping district was visible from his view. Logres was barely a city with a population of only 12,000, but it did well enough thanks to the steel mills and car factories right up the highway in West Amsterdam. Not that Andrew knew about any of this – or would have cared. But he was growing annoyed with the car alarm and flopped back onto his bed, frustration mounting.

"Crap, think!" he demanded of himself out loud as he glanced around his room.

Painted a bold blue, it was decorated with posters of quarterbacks and dinosaurs. Toys based on anime cartoons and half-finished model cars littered a good portion of the space not taken up by dirty clothing. A stack of video games were arranged in the corner next to a small desk that Andrew occasionally did his homework at, a cluttered bookcase beside it. The majority of boys Andrew's age would love this room. He pretty much hated it.

A door slammed elsewhere in the house, and a faint yell could be heard. He assumed Erin had been at it with the parents again. Sprawled on his bed, feeling sorry for himself, he considered the fact that at least he wasn't a grownup. That would suck. One hand dangling off the bed, Andrew thought about how Stupid Dad had to go to some boring job every day. School was bad enough. He idly wondered what Stupid Mom did all day besides cook and clean. Oh, and that yoga class she was always going on about. Wait, was it *yogurt class?* Why would they exercise to make yogurt?

Andrew didn't care. Swinging his arm in wider arcs, his hand found a stray shoe. Grabbing it up, he launched it across the room at his bookshelf. It crashed against a pile of nature magazines, spilling them onto the carpet. Andrew still didn't care. He made a little sound of satisfaction when he looked over at the mess.

Then his eyes went wide.

One of the things Stupid Dad had got for him last Christmas was a subscription to a children's nature magazine, and Andrew had barely leafed through them. The only one that had ever caught his attention had been the issue on sharks. That one had fascinated him, although probably not in the manner that Stupid Dad would have approved of. When they had gone on a family vacation to Florida the past summer, one of the few things Andrew had gotten excited about was the jar of shark teeth he had bought.

Right then, it all came together. He didn't need the parents. He knew they would be mad, but so what? The costume would be awesome, the costume would be *real.* He would be a mutant shark monster.

"I hate them," Erin said out loud to her empty room.

Rolling over on her bed and brushing her long, strawberry-blonde hair back out of her face, she carefully retrieved her favorite stuffed dragon and looked it square in the googly plastic eyes. "I hate them both."

She had just turned thirteen the previous month and was in seventh grade at Logres Central Middle School. She was not a child any more, and had pointed out to Dear Ol' Dad, that she had started getting her period the past spring. Unfortunately, that had been the wrong direction to take the argument, and he had gotten pretty aggravated. He had actually yelled at her! This just wouldn't do.

Erin began quietly singing to herself as she hugged her stuffed dragon and let her eyes wander the room. Opposite to Andrew's, it was all things pink and girly. Just like Andrew, just hated it, too. Much like she currently hated the parents. At first, she had been upset because she really did just want to go, really did want Mike Adamson to see her in that sexy witch costume she had secretly bought. Now, it was out of principle.

Climbing off her bed, Erin went to stand in front of her dressing mirror. Framed in stained walnut and able to pivot in two directions, it was one of the few gifts the parents had ever pulled off that wasn't terribly lame. Tall for her age, she was still stick-thin and lacking any real curves. Her hair had more of a reddish cast than Andrew's, which was closer to a sandy blonde, but both had hazel eyes and a few freckles. It was obvious they were siblings, and if anyone took the time to notice, they would realize it was obvious "the parents" were not.

Erin stripped down to just her panties, glanced in the mirror and then thought better of it. No reason to give Dear Ol' Dad a thrill before hand. She slipped a ratty, black tee shirt on that she had worn when she had been forced to help paint the deck in the beginning of spring. Good enough.

"I hate them, de Rais," Erin said, speaking to her stuffed dragon. "And I think it's about time I killed them."

Andrew had already changed clothes once, snuck into the bathroom, changed his mind, and snuck back. It hadn't mattered much, since no one had been upstairs but his sister and she wouldn't have cared what he was up to. Finally, after thinking over what he was going to do, he tip-toed back down the hall in just his underwear with his selected outfit bundled up under his arm. Finally inside, he locked the bathroom door and checked the window. Andrew knew he could slip out onto the roof above the deck and then climb down – he had done it twice before. There was another half-bath downstairs, so he didn't worry too much about being interrupted.

Carefully, he unrolled his grey sweatpants and matching sweatshirt. The sweatshirt had a baseball team's logo on it, and that had given him momentary pause, but then he realized he could wear both inside out. He really wished he had grey sneakers, but black would have to do. At least the sweatshirt was a hoodie. Concealed within the folds of the clothing was the mason jar that held eighteen assorted shark's teeth. There was also an exacto blade and a set of needle-nosed pliers he had used when fiddling with a few models.

Andrew sat the jar of shark's teeth on the toilet, then thought better of it. He opened the lid first, and set it in the sink over top of the drain. Even if he accidentally lost one or two, it shouldn't matter. He was pretty sure they wouldn't all fit. Peering into the mirror, he smiled and growled at his reflection. He pulled at his lips and examined his gums. Having already lost a few baby teeth, he only had a few grownup ones. Andrew wasn't worried about them. He'd find replacements later.

Taking the pliers, Andrew gripped one of his front teeth and began to wiggle it. Disgruntled, he tried wiggling it harder in the other direction. He gasped as the tooth snapped in half, a tiny white stub visible right below his gum line.

"Crap," he muttered as he downed the pliers and scrounged around for the exacto blade. Making a little slice into his upper gum, blood poured down into his mouth. He spit it out and pried the pink flesh apart so he had more room to work. This time, getting a tight grip on the tooth, he yanked straight down. The tooth was rip free, root trailing. He tossed it in the sink as he gazed up into the crimson socket.

"Wow, this is gonna take a long time," he said to the mirror as blood ran down his chin.

"Erin, honey… what are you doing?"

Erin grimaced at the woman who had been designated her Mother. She took in the perfectly coifed golden hair, the fake tan, the designer caprice pants. Turned partially sideways, the woman couldn't see the knife in Erin's hand.

"Mom, could you help me?"

"What's wrong?" she replied, getting to her feet off the couch.

"I have a problem…" Erin began as her pretend Mom crossed over to her.

"Honey, why aren't you wearing any pants?"

"… with you," finished Erin as she quickly slide the knife up into the woman's throat.

Gurgling, she clawed at the blade, only to slice open her own fingers. Erin held the knife firmly in place with one hand, gripping her former Mom's head by that perfect hair with the other hand. She held it for a three count before deftly pulling it out in a single stroke to the side. The motion almost severed the head completely. Dead Mom fell to the kitchen linoleum, all the blood contained to a nice, easy-to-clean area.

"So," Erin said to the corpse as she wiped away some splatter from her face with the shoulder sleeve of her tee shirt. "I'm guessing Dear Ol' Dad's in his office?"

CrapCrapCrap! thought Andrew as he hacked away at the last section of his gum line. Not only was the bathroom covered in blood now, the whole process had taken way longer than he had thought it would. A whole hour! Stupid Mom or Stupid Dad would come banging on the door any minute to tell him it was time for dinner. Oh well, he was

a mutant shark monster now, so what were they going to say?

Andrew examined his reflection in the mirror and admired his bloody, fanged grin. It was perfect! He had managed to cram eight in the top and seven in the bottom. At first he had been miffed that they weren't even, but looking at them now, he was quite impressed with the vision. He could see his gums were already healing back over his new teeth, absorbing their presence and adapting accordingly. He tried some experimental chomping, and shifted one of the left bottom teeth over a bit. Chomp, chomp. Perfect!

Then, Andrew's face fell as a terrible realization hit him.

"I still have people eyes. I need shark eyes. How am I gonna get shark eyes?"

"Come in!"

Erin opened the door, making no attempt to hide the knife or the fact that she was covered in blood. There was no point since she was in the doorway and Dear Ol' Dad had no other exit. For a moment, she watched him fumble with his papers, his tie abandoned but his shirt still tucked in. It was enough to make her vomit, or in this case, brutally murder him.

"What's up, honey?"

Honey. How she hated that cutesy nickname.

"Dad," she simply said, waiting for him to look up.

"Um-hm," he replied, still caught up in his precious little career.

"Dear Ol' Daddy Dearest," she said, this time letting the malice flow in each syllable.

This time he looked up. He looked, he blinked, he went very, very pale.

"Erin, what…"

A single finger to her lips.

He went silent.

"Tell me," she asked as she entered his office, closing the door behind her. "Did they tell you exactly what this assignment was, by chance? Who it was you were… babysitting?"

Silent. Rigid. Pale.

"Daddy, answer my question."

"Yes," he managed to choke out.

"I see. And you took it anyway. What *did* they offer you?"

He sputtered on his words, but Erin got the gist.

"Money?" she questioned with a laugh. "So I take it you really didn't believe what the job duty description laid out then?"

He shook his head an emphatic *no*.

"Hmmm… well, I guess that means I'll have to have a word with management," she said as she drew the knife point along the edge of the desk around to him. "We're not going to want a repeat of this."

He shook his head an even greater *no*.

"I mean, like, when the ninth set of parents are roped into this gig."

Andrew sat on the toilet, lid closed, grumbling. He hadn't even thought about shark eyes, but now that he had, he knew the costume would be totally dumb without

them. Crap, how was he going to get those? And where were the parents?

Finally annoyed with everything, Andrew got up and looked in the mirror one last time. Except for some dried blood around his mouth, the new teeth had set and adapted. They looked really awesome. Chomp, chomp! He washed off the last little bit of blood and reached for the door. The parents would so find out if he snuck out now, plus he was hungry. If they freaked out on him about his cool new teeth, he would just eat them. It wouldn't be like it was the *first* set he had munched on, or anything.

Just as Andrew was opening the door, the handle was yanked out of his hand. Erin stood outside in the hallway, her brows creased in that way when she was irritated. They started at each other.

"There you are. Where have you been?"

"In here. Why is there blood all over you?"

"Why are your teeth all fucked up?"

"Oohhh, you just said 'fuck.' I'm gonna tell!"

"So did… never mind. I'm covered in blood 'cause I just killed the parents."

"Huh, really? That's cool, these ones where pretty dumb."

"Yeah."

The siblings stared at each other some more.

"Crap, I'm kinda hungry though," said Andrew.

Erin sighed. "I'll make you something."

They walked back downstairs and into the kitchen. Andrew leaned over to examine his sister's handiwork on their ex-Mom while Erin rummaged around in the refrigerator. He poked at the cooling wound and made a noise signaling he was impressed. Erin pulled out some leftover fried chicken, sat it on the counter and stuck a casserole dish of macaroni and cheese in the microwave.

"Dad number eight is draining out in his office," she said as she filled up two glasses with milk.

Andrew took in this information. "They weren't as bad as number five."

Erin made a face. "I doubt any ever will be. None will last more than a day, at least."

Andrew fiddled with his teeth. Chomp, chomp.

"So what's that all about?"

"I'm a mutant shark monster!" Andrew exclaimed.

"You're an idiot."

"Nuh-uh, shut up!"

Erin squinted at her brother and his "costume."

"Maybe you, like, need fins or something."

"That might work. I wish I had shark eyes."

"Sorry, all out," said Erin as the microwave dinged. "Besides, I'm not sure if they would work in the same way as the teeth."

"Why not?"

Erin didn't answer him. Instead she said, "Maybe I can put a glamour on them to *look* like shark eyes."

"You think so?" he asked excitedly.

"Maybe."

Andrew's face fell as she put out all of the food of the kitchen table. "Nah, you'll

get in trouble. We're both gonna get in trouble."

"Yeah, eventually," she replied as she laid out paper plates and silverware. "But it's Tuesday, the 26th. The parents made their weekly call to check in on Sundays. I know, 'cause I overheard once. That means I can still go to my party on Friday and you…"

"Can totally go trick or treating on Saturday! On Halloween!"

"Well, Halloween is on Sunday, but trick or treating hours are on Saturday this year, so yeah. Yeah. Fuck it, we'll get in trouble next week."

Andrew and Erin, both smiling, ate in silence for a while. After a bit, however, their own thoughts began to consume them. The siblings had the same thoughts.

"Erin?" Andrew asked as he pushed his macaroni around on the plate.

"Yeah?"

"Why can't we live with our *real* parents? With our own people like us and stuff?"

Andrew always asked the same question shortly after they had murdered their latest set of surrogate parents. Erin felt like she should be mad at him since he kept bringing it up, but she had the same feelings. The whole thing made her angry.

"I dunno, Andrew. The *Aes Sidhe* Elders want the youth to, like, integrate with the humans or something. They don't want the Unseelie Court hiding in the shadows anymore, I guess."

The young Goblin cast his eyes over at the dead body of their most recent Mom. "Um, I don't think it's working."

"No, Andrew," Erin said with a sad smile. "I don't think so, either."

THE PERFECT PUMPKIN
John Claude Smith

John Claude Smith has had 50 dark fiction veering into horror veering into what-the-hell-was-that?, short stories, 3 poems, and over 1,100 music journalism pieces published. He is currently aligning the TOC for an ebook anthology entitled, *The Dark Is Light Enough For Me,* while his agent shops around two novels. A third novel is thisclose to first draft finished—really, if he wasn't typing up this bio, it might be done! He is presently nomadic, living between Northern California and Rome, Italy, with intentions towards planting himself in the latter.

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"If it wasn't a week before Halloween, I'd be scared crazy. But I know you well enough, Danny, to know that you like to tell stories, and I've already heard this one a dozen times over the last two weeks—"

"But it's true, Melinda. Cutter's farm is where old Dr. Ranier does abortions, or at least did them. Look, it's perfect: it's just far enough out of town as to be kind of anon … anonymous. He used to be a doctor, a…a baby doctor—"

"Obstetrician."

"Yeah, yeah, an obstetrician. And he was disbarred—"

"That's for a lawyer."

"Well, shit, Brainic! He lost his license and moved out here, about ten, maybe twelve-years-ago, and since he's not really a farmer, he has to have some income, so he —"

"So he sets up office as a country abortionist—"

"And the babies are supposed to come back to haunt anybody who trespasses—"

"Stop! I've heard enough. He must be doing some farming now, otherwise, where'd all these pumpkins come from?"

"I dunno, they must grow wild. Creepy stuff, eh?"

"Just nightmares or rumors, made-up stories meant to scare kids from having sex, and in this case, 'cause of the abortionist slant, getting pregnant and all that. Kind of a gruesome safe sex message, don't you think? And isn't that what all horror stories made primarily for kids are up to, anyway? Just like in the movies, if you're a teenager and you have sex, the boogyman's gonna get you—ooooOOOOOoooo, I'm soooo frightened."

With whiplash precision, she shifted her attitude from mockingly scared to salaciously seductive, easily distracting him. "Danny, oh, Danny, bab-eeeee..." She purred the last syllable, long and languid. She grabbed his crotch, squeezing hard, whispering something nasty and oh-so-enticing in his ear. As his penis turned to steel, his brain turned to mush.

Having gotten his attention, she let go and backed away. "You gonna help me get a perfect pumpkin from this patch or not?"

"What about my—"

"Later, big boy, when we're out of range of any sexually oppressed boogymen disguised as abortionist farmers."

Danny Cruise peered out at the fog-mottled field, wispy tendrils like plumes of thickening smoke eerily weaving through the pumpkins, looking like a congregation of ghosts…or a herd of monstrous beasts lashing the pumpkins with writhing tentacles; his imagination sprang back to life with a potency that unnerved him while coinciding with the deflation of his penis. Melinda Harner, his girlfriend, folded her arms across her burgeoning bosom, trying to fend off the October chill. She peered at him, obstinate in her quest to obtain the perfect pumpkin. Now that she had spotted what she claimed was *the* most *perfect* pumpkin for miles around, in which she would carve the winner in the school contest, something that brought a wee bit of fame in a small town like Bloomfield, she was dead set on obtaining this pumpkin, and only this pumpkin. No other pumpkin would suffice.

Danny hopped over the barbed-wire fence, ragged metal tips ripping two fingers; he winced, put the stinging fingers in his mouth, and sprinted toward the fog-embraced pumpkin patch.

"Which one did you want?" His voice seemed not to carry, trapped in the puffy white shroud of fog. But it did carry, and she responded

"There," Melinda harrumphed, pointing to his right at the perfect pumpkin, she thought, for her to carve a masterpiece. Her voice hit Danny with the force of a thunderclap; goosebumps tickled his flesh.

After having heard about the fat, perfect pumpkins in this patch, as well as the sordid recent history of the farm via whispers in the hallways at Lincoln High, anxiously retold by Danny mere minutes ago, Melinda knew she had to check it out. Her nature was competitive and she was always looking for that special edge. If this patch actually had the perfect pumpkin she coveted, she knew the edge would be hers. No horror stories were going to stand in her way.

"Here," he said, pointing at one of the dozen or so seemingly perfect, unblemished pumpkins in the direction she had pointed. How could she even tell the difference?

"No, *there*," she bellowed, the volume almost knocking him over again. It was cold and he was tired and if he didn't really love her, he'd already be anywhere but here with a space heater melting his icy flesh and thawing out his freezing blood.

Without speaking, he pointed, and she shook her head, yes--thank God! He pulled out his switchblade and cut the coarse vine, trying to disengage the pumpkin. After a brief struggle, he was victorious, but noticed that he'd smeared blood all over the ragged stem. He assumed it was from his still bleeding fingers, not inclined to inspect it any further.

He plucked it from its roost, amazed by its weight. It was about as big as a slightly super-sized basketball, not huge, but its heft made his arms ache. She better be really appreciative for this, he thought, and ran back to the fence. He handed the pumpkin to her so he could hop over the fence again.

"Careful, it's heavy," he said, as he put it in her eager hands. She grunted and agreed.

"Damn! For its size, that's gotta be the heaviest pumpkin I've ever felt."

Danny braced himself and leaped, this time with even less grace, catching his foot and plopping down hard on his butt. Melinda laughed at his awkward predicament. He frowned at her.

"What? I do this favor for you and you laugh at me now, 'cause I'm cold and tired and--"

She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead as he brushed the weeds out of his hair and clothes.

"Carry this, would'ya?" More insistent than requesting, already handing him the pumpkin.

"I'm just your slave—"

"Slave to my beguiling charms." She put on the act, puppy dog eyes and pouting lips on full display.

They started the two-mile trek back into town, their pace brisk, trying to keep warm.

"It's probably cursed, probably why I tripped up going over the fence."

"You're just clumsy. There's no curse for takin' a pumpkin. No dead babies gonna haunt you. I'm just gonna carve a winner out of this one."

"That stuff is true. I mean, all that about Dr. Ranier doing abortions and stuff." He put his fingers in his mouth again, balancing the pumpkin against his chest. Apparently the cuts were deeper than he'd thought, and continued to bleed profusely.

They both fell silent for a handful of minutes, purposeful strides taking over as the night grew even colder. The overcast skies portended rain and they just wanted to make it home before it started.

And then Danny stumbled, dropping the pumpkin. Not hard, catching it before it really hit the ground, but enough to have it land with a leaden thump on the dirt.

"Damn it, klutz! Do you need walking lessons or what?" Melinda was beside herself with anger, squatting to inspect the pumpkin. All this for naught, she thought; all this for naught.

"Shit, Melinda. It's not like I meant to--"

"You bleedin' on it?"

"Yeah, cut my finger on the fence, bled on the stem…"

Melinda scooted away from the pumpkin, inexplicably alarmed. "How can that be? The pumpkin's got blood comin' from inside."

They both watched as a thin line of blood trickled from a miniscule crack towards the bottom, where it had hit the ground. The red liquid pooled in the dirt.

"T-That's impossible," she said. "Can't be any blood comin' from inside a pumpkin, only pumpkin, seeds and all. You must have bled a lot more than you thought," she said, forcing a smile, obviously in denial of what she was witnessing. More blood seeped from the crack.

Danny pulled out his switchblade and approached the pumpkin. He knelt before it, not really sure what he was going to do, but feeling safer with the knife in his hand.

"Danny?"

With suddenness, curiosity took over, and he plunged the knife into the thick hide of the pumpkin. Blood gushed out, mixed with another unknown fluid that diluted the crimson tide, along with stringy pumpkin guts and pumpkin seeds, spattering the dirt and his shoes. He pried with the knife and his fingers, pulling the pumpkin apart.

"Oh, Christ!" He moaned in revulsion at what he saw.

Melinda squealed, "What is it, Danny? *What is it?*"

The pumpkin had split wide open like a cracked egg. Danny jumped to his feet,

hands dripping wet. An intolerable stench was belched from within the split pumpkin, forcing him to cover his face with his sleeve, while Melinda openly retched, dry and empty. She was on her feet as well, fingers digging crescents into Danny's arms. He didn't feel a thing. They both just stared in horror and disgust.

Within the *womb* of the pumpkin, entwined within a network of ripped veins, a ruptured clear sac, and pumpkin guts and seeds, two large yellow eyes, like jaundiced moons and devoid of pupils, attempted to blindly seek out the source of intrusion. It probably did not see them, thought Danny, as his stomach roiled like a fist-sized hurricane, battering his insides.

It was a fetus, a mutation of inconceivable ugliness borne of nightmares and rumors and curses made real.

"Oh my God, Danny…*Danny!*" Melinda cringed, teetering on hysterical.

The obscenity, skin stained with blood but otherwise as orange as a healthy pumpkin, turned itself in the direction of Melinda's voice, the tiny holes where ears should be steering it in her direction, their direction. Gurgling noises emanated from its throat, wet sounds and orange spittle passing by its lipless slit of a mouth.

"We need to go--*now!*" Melinda, beside herself, doing a nervous dance of desperation: she wanted away from here posthaste…or sooner!

"Wait," Danny said. "I think it's trying to…say something."

Melinda pulled harder on Danny's arm, afraid to leave without him, the night and clouds and vast darkened landscape uninviting despite her urgency to run as far away from here as possible.

"*C'mon! Let's go!*"

The sound that rose from the baby's mouth unhinged the muscles in Danny's legs. He slumped to the ground, transfixed by the fetal abomination squirming and convulsing and hideously *alive* within the pumpkin. Melinda tumbled with him, but not for long. He scrambled to his feet and dragged her to hers, his feet pounding the dirt like a chorus of hammers, matching the freight train rhythm of his heart; his swiftness almost lifted Melinda into the air as one would a kite. The utterance, repeated again and again, insistent, scarred the night with its cawing message, resonant and haunting, cursing both of their ears forever.

One word, only one, but Danny and Melinda would remember it until the day they died.

"Daddy," it screeched, *it begged*.

"Daddy!"

THE WITCH OF MISTLETOE LANE
Court Ellyn

Court Ellyn began writing historical fiction when she was 14, but her interests gradually shifted toward the fantastical. Today, she primarily writes character-driven fantasy. Her fiction has appeared in *Kaleidotrope*, *A Fly In Amber*, *Silver Blade*, and the anthology *Explorers: Beyond the Horizon* (look for it Winter, 2011). Between dragon dens and battlefields strewn with otherworldly foes, she administrates the LegendFire Creative Writing Community at www.legendfire.com. This story is her first foray outside the fantasy genre.

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Every autumn, the clatter of leaves somersaulting along sidewalks reminds me of the October I met the witch. The small southern town of Saint Claire didn't have a lot to boast about but the worst football team in the county, the annual watermelon festival, and Ag shows that brought the fattest pigs and beefiest steers to Main Street, where they showed their appreciation by crapping in front of the cafe, the antique store, and the True Value hardware that still sold hard candy from glass jars. Unbeknownst to the folks outside our insular world, Saint Claire had its very own witch, too. Mothers all over town scared the devil out of us kids every time they warned us to steer clear of the rickety old house that lurked on Mistletoe Lane. My own mother joined the hype. "Colton, you leave that place alone. I see you anywhere near it, I'll bust your hide." To which I inevitably replied, "But why, Mama?" She'd only respond with the look that meant, "You better do as I say."

The first time I found myself outside the witch's gate was a complete accident. Jimmy Harden and I rode our bikes to the cow pond on his grandpa's place, hoping the fish liked the taste of the grubs on our hooks. They did, as it turned out, so we kept tossing our lines in till almost dusk. Realizing the time, we tied our stringers full of half-grown bass to our handlebars and hustled back to town. We were in such a hurry to avoid a whooping for being late to dinner that we turned one street too soon. Jimmy hit his brakes; his back tire left a black streak that must've been a mile long before he came to a stop. Pulling up alongside him, I stared in horror at the crumbling gingerbread house. I'd only ever seen it from the corner, in passing, as Mom hit the gas to get through the intersection fast as she could. Now that I was getting a good look at the place, I decided she'd been right all those years. It was a wonder anyone could live there at all. The house was scary as hell, staring back at us in the manner of Hamlet's skull, pondering our demise. Weeds grew thick as jungles inside the leaning picket fence, and a pair of arborvitaes hid the front façade like hands thrown over a face too hideous to endure. White paint scrolled from the eaves, the wood underneath dry and gray. A couple of upper story windows boasted holes big enough for birds to fly through. The whole place reeked of cat piss.

To me, the creepiest part were the tattered Halloween decorations left over from years past. Though it was June, plastic jack o' lanterns lined the walk to the front door. They used to be orange, but had faded in the southern sun to a whitish yellow, just like skulls of beheaded children. One of those ridiculous "crashed witches" was nailed to a

giant catalpa tree near the rusted mailbox. Her broom had lost its broomcorn and was just a plastic stick that made a likely perch for blue jays. On the front gate hung a weather-beaten sign that read “The Witch Is In.”

Scared the witch might be watching, I backhanded Jimmy in the shoulder. “Let’s get outta here.”

Jimmy grinned in a way that said he was contemplating mischief and swept up a chunk of gravel from the ditch.

“No, man!” I cried.

He chunked it with his Little League arm; it sailed right through a window. Clink, clink, crash, went the glass.

We hightailed it for home, scared out of our minds and exhilarated at the same time, but Jimmy soon came to regret chucking that rock. The next week, his dad fell off a roof and broke his spine. He’s been in a wheelchair ever since. Then Jimmy came down with appendicitis that nearly killed him before his mom got him to the hospital. We never openly blamed these things on the witch or told our parents about the rock he threw, but he and I knew. That was when we were nine or ten.

The autumn I met the witch in person, I was thirteen, suffering through the tortures of Junior High and wet dreams about Elizabeth McDuffy, the Freshman cheerleader with green eyes and hair the color of autumn itself. It was Saturday afternoon, and the week before Halloween. A handful of jocks led by our star running back, Trev Reynolds, were conducted the yearly cat round-up. It was an unspoken tradition. Though all of us Saint Claireans knew about it, we openly denied its existence. For the whole month of October, the town’s cat lovers locked their pets indoors to protect them from the annual purging. It was the vagrant alley cats and their unwanted litters that satisfied the grotesque human desire for destruction. Me and Jimmy, along with Adam Laughton and Tyrone Banks, weren’t invited to take part. The secret ritual belonged to the cool older guys, not green, virginal junior high boys. We could only stand back and watch Randy Tillman’s black pickup truck painted with orange flames roar past just like a dragon. Piled into the cab and in the bed, our heroes hollered and cussed and displayed their trophy: another plastic grocery sack writhing with an irate cat.

All we had was our bikes, bigger and better ones now that we were older, but we were still unable to catch up. At Jimmy’s urging, we tried. We pumped those peddles as fast as our scrawny legs could go. Our war cries sounded less inspiring, because our voices were cracking and we kept choking on the dust kicked up in the pickup’s blazing wake.

Out on county line road, Tyrone hit a pothole and flipped over his handlebars. We stopped to shovel him off the asphalt. “Ah, hell, Ty,” Adam complained. “We’ll never catch ‘em now.”

Tyrone’s hands were bleeding, so was a gash on his leg where he’d caught the jagged edge of a peddle. He groaned and cussed, and Jimmy said, “Shut up. I hear something.”

We listened. Rrreeeeow! A cat in distress!

Up ahead, the road crossed Tallulah Creek. A dirt trail, no more than twin lines of red earth veered off from the main road and plunged out of sight. We tossed our bikes off the road and followed it to the creek bank. Tyrone hobbled fast as he could, dragging his bleeding left leg. Randy’s black truck crouched at the end of the trail, silent and sleeping.

The jocks clustered under the bridge, struggling with a manic beast. *Rrreeeeow!* it shrieked. The bridge amplified the protest. I imagined a creature the size of a panther, but when hunters tugged the rope and hoisted up the noose, all I saw was an ordinary alley cat, orange and white. Her teets were heavy. She had babies somewhere. Jimmy, Adam, and Tyrone cheered with the big guys as the cat kicked and scratched at the noose around her neck. I watched, mesmerized and feeling like I might throw up. The cat was so scared it dropped feces, and the big guys jumped back, squalling and cussing as if the cat had done it as a purposeful act of revenge.

It was then that a couple of the jocks noticed us and chased us down. Trev Reynolds grabbed me and Tyrone by the scruff. Joey Osborn, the coach's son, caught Adam by the shirttails. Jimmy stopped halfway up the trail and measured his options. Ditch his friends or help them out. He was a beefy kid by now, but nowhere near big enough to stand up to these guys. He crossed his arms. "We just wanna see!"

The rest of the brave and bold hunters saw that they'd been caught, and some began to panic. "Ah, man, they're gonna tell Coach!"

"He'll kick us off the team," said Randy Tillman.

Joey Osborn said, "You dumbnut, we *are* the team! What's he gonna do?"

"My dad's the Baptist preacher! He's gonna kill me."

"They won't tell," said Trev Reynolds. He had eyes like a snake, real cool and mean. They looked straight at me, then at Tyrone and Adam. "We'll beat the shit out of 'em if they do, and they know it." He jabbed a finger at Jimmy, lingering a safe distance up the hill. "You! Get down here."

Jimmy craned his neck, likely hoping there was some kind of help coming along the road. No luck. He did as he was told and crept back down under the bridge. Trev Reynolds grabbed him by the shirtfront. "We'll let you see, but you gotta get us another cat. All of ya! Go find us another cat and bring it to the dumpster behind Al's shop. We'll meet you there. If you don't show, we'll find you and hang y'all up instead."

Over the crowd of taller heads, I saw the cat. Her eyes were popping and her tongue stuck out of her mouth. She no longer struggled. Three others hung from rafters under the bridge.

Reynolds slapped me upside the head. "You gonna cry? Go with your girlfriends, Colton Brisby. Yeah, I know who you are, and I know where you live, too. Go get that cat."

"Ah, shit, we're dead. We're dead!" groaned Adam. We walked our bikes back to town, our enthusiasm as withered as nuts dunked in ice-cold water. "We shouldn'ta listened to you, Jimmy."

"Did they mean one cat for all of us, or a cat apiece?" asked Tyrone.

"Ah, shut up, man, we're friggin' dead."

"Quit whining!" Jimmy bellowed, and Adam shut his trap. "We'll stop by my place and pick up an arsenal and catch as many cats as we can. Then they'll let us be."

Our arsenal consisted of the pair of slingshots that Jimmy and I used to shoot frogs at his grandpa's pond. He held mine out, but I shook my head. I didn't want to shoot a cat, not after watching that alley cat strangle to death. But what's a guy to do when his friends look at him like, "What the hell's gotten into you?"

"Hey, I want it!" Tyrone grabbed the slingshot and practiced aiming with it. The

rest of us loaded our pockets with bright steel shot and took off before Jimmy's mom could ask what trouble we were up to.

The first cat we found was slinking around behind the police station. "We can't shoot that one," I said. "What if Wade comes out and sees us. He might arrest us for cruelty to animals or concealed firearms." Saint Claire was so small we only had three town cops; Wade was the police chief.

Jimmy shook his slingshot in my face. "Not very concealed, is it, dimwit."

"Well, for brandishing weapons inside city limits, then."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "How 'bout jaywalking? We been jaywalking all over town, stupid. Everybody does it, and nobody gives a shit."

"Jaywalking don't hurt nothing, dumbass!"

Adam, at least, saw my reasoning. He broke up the argument before fists started flying. "C'mon, let's find a different cat."

We searched and searched, and the longer we searched the more Adam panicked. By late afternoon he started looking downright sick, trailing along behind, holding his stomach. We'd raked the town and finally found ourselves on the northern edge. Past Seventh Street, there wasn't much but cow pasture.

Tyrone stopped cold and cried, "There's one!" A giant beast slunk through the tall grass in the roadside ditch, on the prowl. He turned those malevolent yellow eyes on us and darted off. "It's a black one, too! Get it!" Tyrone wasted three good shots trying to hit him on the run. Jimmy took slow, careful aim, leading the cat by a few inches. Then the stupid animal paused in the intersection to glance back at us. Jimmy let fly. The steel ball lit a bright streak across the breeze. The cat yowled, spun, looking for the source of its pain, then took off like a bullet. We loosed our war cries and gave chase, leaping fences and flowerbeds and scrambling over cars parked in driveways. For a while we thought we lost it, but it darted out from under Mrs. Stein's garden shed, a dozen yards away. We were nearly on top of that poor cat, when it turned onto a dilapidated street. I stopped so fast that I nearly ran out of my Converse shoes. Mistletoe Lane. And that black cat was limp-running straight for the witch's house. The guys seemed to realize all at once, and stopped in the middle of the street. Panting and sweating, we stared at a shadow moving across a window. The front gate was propped open and the ragged ol' sign said, "The Witch Is In." The cat hobbled through, leaving a bloody paw print every time it stepped with its back foot.

A strangled, gurgling scream came from the house. The screen door banged shut and a woman ran up the sidewalk between the faded jack o' lanterns. Except for the green skin, she might've been the twin of the Wicked Witch of the West. Long chin, hook nose, bony fingers, everything. Her black hair was a wild mess of frizz, and her eyes bugged out of her face, full of madness. She scooped up the wounded cat and cradled it like a baby, cooing and whimpering in a strange, ungodly language.

The four of us backed away slowly, but she looked right at us, and her free hand flicked and snapped out some symbols. Jimmy wailed, "No! Nooooo!" He turned and fled. The rest of us weren't two paces behind.

We didn't stop running till we reached the school yard. The swings and teeter-totters for the elementary kids looked like the most benevolent place in the universe. Jimmy collapsed on the merry-go-round and sobbed. "I'm doomed. I didn't know it was her cat. Ah, God, I didn't *know*."

"You're not doomed, Jimmy," Tyrone said, sitting beside him, fingers clasping the metal bar between them.

Jimmy ignored him. "Colton, you know. You saw what happened, and now my dad's in a wheelchair, and it's my fault. Ah, God!"

I couldn't argue. I just stared at the deep wallow that hundreds of feet had dug around the merry-go-round and listened to him sob.

"My mom'll be next. She'll die of the plague or something and I'll have to go live with grandpa. I hate cows!"

"What's he talking about, Colt?" asked Adam, looking sicker than ever. I told him and Ty about the rock Jimmy threw all those years ago.

"I never had my tonsils out," cried Jimmy. "I don't want to go back to the hospital. The food's terrible and those nurses treat you like meat, then they hand you a balloon like everything's gonna be okay, but it's not. I'm doomed."

I sighed. "Well, this time we're all doomed together. Maybe the curse will just stick to us and not bother our families. We can die heroes."

Adam finally caught on. "*Cursed?* Ah, shit, man, we're dead."

"You think she'll eat us?" asked Tyrone. "My Auntie Tisha said the witch had a sister who used to live with her. But they fought and the witch poisoned her and fed her to them cats."

"Nobody's gonna eat us, Ty," I said, though my tone lacked conviction. "Y'all come sleep over at my house tonight. We'll go to church in the morning and pray that the curse don't take hold."

"What about Trev Reynolds and the others?" Tyrone asked. "We gotta bring 'em a cat, or they'll kill us before any curse will."

I had to puzzle that one out. "We'll sleep with the slingshots."

"We only got two!" cried Adam.

"I got a BB gun," said Ty.

"Okay, go get it, and be at my place by dark." I'd rarely felt so exhilarated. All we needed was an Ennio Morricone soundtrack playing in the background. On top of dodging bullies and waiting for the shootout, we'd been cursed to boot. Life couldn't get more adventurous in Saint Claire.

We sat in a solemn row on the front pew of the Calvary Baptist Church and prayed like we had never prayed before. The preacher kept eyeing us during the sermon, suspicious of our sudden devoutness, but for once we didn't have any pranks in mind. In fact, we were a bit delirious. None of us had slept too well. Near midnight, Adam swore he heard Randy's truck growling past the house, and the streetlight shone through the oak tree on our front lawn, casting a shadow across my wall that at 2 a.m. looked just like the witch's wild black hair.

After church, the four of us shook hands. "Well," I said, "I hope to see y'all on Monday. If I don't, well, no crying at my funeral. Hear?"

"Gotcha, man," said Jimmy. "Everybody stay low. Keep in touch."

We parted ways. I can't explain the sorrow I felt when I considered that I might never see those guys again. Peering in the rearview mirror, Dad saw me moping and asked, "Guilty conscience, kiddo?"

"Nah, I just don't feel too good." At first I thought it was just a lie, to get out of

explaining the curse, but the more I thought about it, the more I really did feel queasy. The certainty struck me that a tumor was growing in my guts. I was sure it was already the size of a baseball.

My little sister scooted as far from me as the car door allowed. “Don’t you puke on me, Colton Brisby!” Melissa crossed her index fingers to ward off the evil of invisible germs.

“Ain’t gonna puke on nobody, big baby.”

Mom turned around in the passenger seat and frowned. “I’ll pick up some Pepto when I go in for the milk.”

“No, Mom, I’m fine.” How to explain that I was dying and Pepto Bismal wouldn’t help? We pulled into the lot of the grocery store, and Dad kept the car running while Mom and Melissa went in. I squirmed in the backseat for a minute before deciding that sitting still thinking about it was a bad idea. I hurried after Mom and offered to push the cart. She looked at me like I’d lost my mind, then smiled and humored my moment of selflessness. She put a bottle of Pepto in with the milk, the box of Rice o’ Roni, and several bags of Halloween candy. When she hurried ahead, I discreetly put the Pepto back on the shelf and pressed at the achy place in my stomach where the tumor was sucking the life out of me.

At the checkout counter, ol’ Mrs. Beals dropped our stuff into plastic bags while she ooh’d and aw’d over how big Melissa and I had gotten. Melissa rolled her eyes, because Mrs. Beals told us that every Sunday. I thanked Mrs. Beals, polite as I could, hoping to earn God’s favor. Then at the next counter, I glimpsed a flutter of fingers that snagged my attention like a grub on a hook. A woman flashed some hand signs just like the witch. A little girl who could only be her daughter, flashed more signs in reply.

Like a bolt a out of the blue, I realized. “She’s deaf!”

The woman across the way straightened and looked at me as though I’d given her the finger, then wrapped a protective arm around her daughter. My own mother pinched my arm, like she did when I misbehaved in church. “Shh, what’s wrong with you? For goodness’ sake.”

My face burned, and I slouched out of the grocery store. Climbing into the car beside me, Melissa said, “That’s Erin. She’s new in my class this year. She’s mostly in special ed though. Some of the boys made fun of her at first, but they got sent to the principal’s office. I think she’s real nice.”

I’d rarely felt more like a complete idiot. Such was our terror that none of us had recognized the obvious. The witch wasn’t cursing us. She was probably cussing us out in sign language. She probably wasn’t a witch at all, and there we were running scared from a deaf woman. Brave cat hunters, indeed. Damn.

By the time we pulled into the driveway, my tumor was gone.

First thing Monday morning, I gathered Jimmy, Tyrone, and Adam outside Mr. Jamison’s classroom and told them the good news. “You mean we’re not gonna die?” asked Tyrone.

Adam sighed and sagged against the wall.

Jimmy crossed his arms and looked disappointed. “Deaf or not, I still think she’s a witch. My dad’s still in a wheelchair.”

“He fell off a roof, Jimmy,” I said. “That could happen to anybody. And lots of people have their appendixes taken out. It don’t mean she cursed you.”

"Like hell it don't." Sulking, he went in to class.

Adam came to attention and fled in after him. A crowd of High Schoolers approached. Books that weighed a ton looked small under their arms. In their midst, Trev Reynolds pointed at Tyrone and me, and those cool snake eyes promised retribution for disobeying his order about the cat.

A crowd of cheerleaders tagged along behind, giggling and fussing with their makeup. Elizabeth McDuffy fluffed her red hair and looked just like a model in a Pantene commercial. I swear her green eyes met mine, and I felt ten feet tall. I couldn't act scared in front of her. Instead, I stuck out my chin and pointed right back at Trev Reynolds. He threw back his head and laughed. "I'm gonna smear you into the pavement, Brisby. You and all your little girlfriends."

Tyrone grabbed my finger and hauled me into algebra.

For third period, Mrs. Demitri took her English class to the library, where we had to choose something to read for the end-of-semester book report. I hated book reports more than long division. I even hated them more than the cafeteria food, which is saying a lot. We browsed through the achingly dull novels, groaning and fighting the urge to flee the building. I curled my lip at titles like *The Good Earth* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and almost settled on *Shane*, because my dad liked the old Alan Ladd movie, but a little farther along, the word "witch" caught my attention. I slipped the book off the shelf and gave it a suspicious look-over, expecting to find a trick lurking inside. *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. Hmm … award-winner, skinny, and look at that! The author's name was Elizabeth. Couldn't go wrong with that. While the librarian stamped the date on the inside for me, I began to regret my choice. I didn't need a reminder of the witch. My tumor might be gone, and my family was surely safe, but I remembered the way that black cat hobbled home, and the look on the witch's face as she scooped him up. I felt sick now for a whole new reason.

"We have to go back and apologize, guys." We gathered around one of the tables whose scarred plastic chairs were always too small.

"Apologize? For what?" asked Tyrone.

"The witch?" asked Jimmy. "Are you crazy?"

"No way!" Adam said. "I'm never going back there."

"Shhh!" hissed Mrs. Demitri. I sat back in the tiny chair and sulked. I didn't want to go to the witch's house by myself, but it seemed I had no choice. Searching the shelves in the reference section, I found a book on sign language. With the few minutes left of third period, I practiced making the letters and a few other signs. All the while, I knew I was putting my life at risk. The witch was said to have fed her own sister to her cats, after all. After what we did, she might decide to turn me into Meow Mix next.

For the rest of the day I practiced the signs under my desk, though I forgot half the letters by the time the bell rang. After fetching Melissa from the front of the Elementary building, I hurried home. Melissa got mad at me for leaving her half a block behind, but I didn't listen. I blew through the house at top speed.

"Where you going?" Mom called after me.

"I'm s'posed to meet the guys. At the cow pond."

"Do your homework first!"

"Ain't got any."

"Since when?"

I was out the door and on my bike before she could stop me. The temperature had dropped throughout the day, and the sky was a gloomy gray. My fingers were numb by the time I reached Mistletoe Lane. Swinging off my bike at the end of the street, I stared at the horror of a house as if death waited for me there. Step by pained step I approached the gate. It banged in the north wind. The sign announced, "The Witch is In." Brown leaves rattled in the branches of an old oak, and a calico cat slunk away through the jungle of weeds.

My hand managed to reach out and still the swinging gate, but for the life of me, my feet refused to enter the avenue between the leering jack o' lanterns. The heavy front door opened, and the witch stood behind the screen, hands flashing. My brain went blank, and I forgot the signs I had practiced. Finally, she made a swatting motion, as if I were a fly, bidding me get away from her gate. In truth, I felt about as small.

Closing my eyes, I recalled the picture on the page that had mattered most, then made a fist and drew a circle over my heart: sorry. With my thumb and forefinger I made like I was preening a whisker on my face: cat.

The witch stopped flapping at me, and her mouth opened a little in surprise. It was working! I shaped the letters of my name: C-O-L-T-O-N.

Slowly, as if she expected me to start throwing tomatoes, she stuck her hand around the screen door and spelled S-E-L-S-I-E. When I didn't start laughing or chucking rocks, she gave me the flat palm that means "wait" in every language. She disappeared inside the house for a good long while, then came back carrying a brown paper bag, the kind Mom packed our lunches in when we could't stand the cafeteria food a day longer. Selsie sidled up the sidewalk, overweight and smelling warm and musty and barely able to look me in the eye. She might have been as old as my mother. Hands that badly needed lotion extended the bag over the gate. I stared at it, the old scolding racing through my head: Never accept candy from strangers! But it was almost Halloween, the only time we were allowed to break that rule. And how old was I anyway? I took the bag, and Selsie retreated, wild hair blowing like a tumbleweed in the wind. I waited till I'd ridden back to the intersection before I peeked inside the bag. I don't know what I was expecting, fried baby fingers or blood-colored lollipops, but the sight of those enormous peanut butter cookies still warm from the oven made my mouth water.

I peddled fast as I could to Jimmy's house, which was only two doors down from mine. He came running when I called and listened to my tale with the same expression of astonishment as the toads who didn't see the bicycle wheel coming. "She seemed scared of me, but nice. She gimme this." I held up the paper bag.

"What is it?" Jimmy edged away, expecting something to spring out and latch onto his face.

"Cookies. You want one?" I offered one to him. They were cooling off already.

"No way, man." He started backing up the wheelchair ramp. "They might turn you into a frog or a mouse, and her cats will eat you. Look, my dad's calling. I got homework to do. Talk to you later."

Confounded, I walked the rest of the way home, carried the paper bag up to my room and sat on my bed, staring at the cookies. Could Jimmy be right? Mustering my courage, I nibbled an edge. And sighed. Crunchy but melt-in-your-mouth good. I waited for the change to happen. No warts. No croaking. I took a bigger bite. Had to be the best cookie I ever ate. By the time I finished the first one, an old bedtime story returned to

haunt me. A little boy named Tom ate a magical jelly bean, but it wasn't until the next morning that he woke up and found he'd shrunk to the size of a cockroach. He spent the next several pages battling dust mites under his bed before the magic wore off and he returned to normal. Maybe I'd wake up the same way, or maybe I wouldn't wake up at all. I ate every cookie Selsie gave me, telling myself what a sweet death it would be.

All I got was a stomach ache and a scolding from mom and dad when I didn't eat my supper. They banished me to my room for the rest of the evening. Those kinds of silent martyrdoms were unavoidable at times, but well worth the trouble.

The whole town turned out to watch the Halloween parade. Saint Claire was fond of parades. Still is, I guess. Besides the Ag shows and watermelon festival, parades were the only showy spectacle we had to entertain ourselves. Of course, the conservatives of Saint Claire, who amounted to ninety-nine percent of the town, deemed it sacrilegious to hold a parade in honor of a pagan holiday, so we had to call it the Oktoberfest parade, though only a handful of German descendants lived among us. Farmers filled pickup trucks with pumpkins and hay bales, while each class and every church festooned cars with balloons, ribbon, and shoe polish, our version of floats. The school band, two dozen inept musicians, led the thing down Main Street. Alongside the tuba and bass drum, Rebecca Duckett flipped a baton, or tried to. She dropped it three times between the drug store and Al's mechanic shop. Jimmy made a point of laughing and shaking his head as she passed. Even we Junior High losers ranked higher than miserable, fat Rebecca Duckett. If the school building was full of wolf cubs, she was the Omega. I listened to Jimmy's laughter, thought of Selsie, and felt sorry for Rebecca. She marched valiantly past, off-rhythm, tripped on her own feet, and nearly clubbed Mrs. Demitri to death. I cringed, unable to watch any longer.

The Homecoming Queen approached, riding loftily in a throne that was bolted to a jangling flatbed trailer. The team captain, who'd gotten to kiss her, stood beside her looking cross and bored. The queen sparkled in her cheap tiara, waved, and tossed handfuls of candy. The elementary kids scrambled in the gutters for broken lollipops and squished Tootsie Rolls, but Jimmy and I crossed our arms and stood our ground. We were in Junior High now and far too dignified to fight for candy off the street.

The rest of the football team came next, sitting around the edge of a second trailer. They looked tough in their jerseys and swung their legs while they watched the cheerleaders doing back flips to cheers from the crowd. Elizabeth McDuffy flipped past, a flash of red hair and long legs, and Jimmy nudged me, ruining my euphoria.

The Shriners took up the rear, old men in little clown cars and coffee-can hats. Once they puttered past, the parade was over. It had taken all of ten minutes of my life, but it was ten minutes I could never get back. The only positive to be found was that school let out for the event, and now we were free to go home. It was two days till Halloween. Jimmy and I had costumes to finalize.

"I wanna go as the Headless Horseman," he said, pondering how to turn a black bed sheet into something convincing.

I milled through the box of costume parts on his bedroom floor. "You don't got a horse. So you'd be the Headless-Horseless Horseman."

He chucked a pillow at me and swung a foot. I rolled out of range, laughing to bust a seam. "It's not my fault it's stupid."

"It ain't!" He sagged on the edge of his bed. "What do you think I should be?"

"I think we're getting too old to dress up, that's what. We oughta paint our faces black and go egging." Another Saint Claire tradition. The night of Halloween, tricks were the norm; they usually involved eggs, toilet paper, and canned whipped cream.

"Egging's for High Schoolers only. We'll get smeared. And if Trev and Randy catch us—"

"Who was so brave the other day under the bridge, Scaredy Cat? Hey, you know what we should do?"

"No more cat huntin', man."

"No, no. Go see if Selsie has anymore of them cookies. I been thinking about 'em all day."

"Who the hell is Selsie?"

"The witch, genius. Remember?"

"Aw, drop it, man. You're never gonna get me back there."

"I'm not a toad, am I? They were just cookies, damn it. C'mon! Don't make me double dare you."

Jimmy groaned and slunk after me. "If I end up in the hospital, it's all your fault." He fell farther and farther behind on his bike. I waited for him at the intersection of Seventh and Mistletoe. When he caught up, I showed him how to spell his name in signs. He didn't even try. "Aw, this is dumb," he whined. "She's gonna eat us."

That was the last straw. "Superstitious baby! Come or not, I don't care." Pumping the peddles, I left Jimmy in the dust. He had to hurry to catch up. We propped our bikes against the sagging picket fence and stood outside the gate, waiting. A wisp of curtain moved on the second story. Shortly after, the front door cracked open. At first, only her white hand appeared. I waved. The rest of Selsie emerged, but she didn't look happy that I'd brought someone. I signed his name, J-I-M-M-Y.

She gave him the evil eye and slowly spelled W-I-N-D-O-W. Shit! She'd seen him throw that rock after all, and remembered him after all these years.

"Make a fist!" I ordered and, grabbing Jimmy's elbow, tried to make the sign for "sorry" on his chest.

He shook me off. "What the hell?"

I had to apologize for him and drew the circle over my own heart. Selsie seemed reluctant to accept it, but she didn't shut the door in our faces either. I didn't know the sign for "cookies" but I could spell it with my fingers. After some deliberation, she nodded and waved us to come in the gate.

"It's a trap, man," said Jimmy.

"Are you kidding?"

"I told you, I still think she's a witch."

"Witches can't be nice and give a kid some more cookies?"

"They charmed you, that's what they did, and here we are, getting sucked in. Go in if you want to, but I'm waiting out here. Just in case you don't come back."

I hurried up the sidewalk to show Jimmy how stupid he was, and those leering jack 'o lanterns were just faded bits of plastic. The front porch was rotting through, and the stink of cat piss nearly choked me, but I made it in the front door. The living room of that old house was cluttered, yet orderly. Stacks of frayed paperback books lined a trail that led to the kitchen, where a big cast iron pot bubbled on the stove. Bundles of herbs

and dried flowers hung from the ceiling, and a gray-striped cat leapt off the small dining table and disappeared into another room. The whole place screamed "witch" at me. There was even one of those old-fashioned brooms propped in the corner by the back door. Funny to think of Selsie zooming over our rooftops under the crescent moon while we slept. Funny. And not so funny. She picked up a plate off the counter and let me choose a cookie. They weren't as fresh as the other day, but they were still ambrosia.

Ah, hell, what was the sign for "thank you"? I couldn't remember, so I just said it loud as I could. Selsie watched my mouth intently. To my surprise she spoke aloud: "Welcome." The word didn't sound quite right, and the position of her tongue was exaggerated, but I understood her just fine. She looked ragged and distrustful, eyes darting about the kitchen, like she was trying to assess it from my perspective, then she started wiping down the countertops. Next time she glanced my direction I made the sign for "cat." She watched my mouth. "All right?" I asked.

She bid me wait and from another room brought a cat carrier. The great black beast was curled up inside with a white bandage wrapped around his hind leg. "Okay," Selsie said. Relieved, I stuck my finger through the grate to pet the beast, but his ears laid back and he hissed like a demon. I jumped a foot back, and Selsie added, "Remember you."

I felt like a shithead for following Trev Reynolds' orders. Selsie sat the cat carrier down and ran to stir whatever bubbled in her stew pot. *Double, double, toil and trouble*, I thought while I meandered back into the living room, nibbling my cookie. The stacks of books looked like towers of a miniature world. Romance novels, that's what the scary witch spent her time reading, not grimoires of black magic or satanic bibles. The one bookshelf had no books on it, only pictures in frames. A bolt of fear shot through my guts, because in one, Selsie stood next to a woman that could have been her twin; less prominent a nose, sleeker hair, sharp suit. Was this the sister she murdered?

Glancing over my shoulder, I found Selsie glowering at the picture. The front door was only feet away. I could make it to safety if I sprinted, so I had to ask. "Cat," I signed and pointed at the photograph, made a motion of eating. Selsie's untrimmed eyebrows pinched.

"Sibyl eat cats?" she asked.

Sibyl, was it? "No," I said slowly. "Cats eat Sibyl?"

Selsie laughed the laughter of those who have never heard laughter before. "No!" she said, then spelled D-A-L-L-A-S.

"Your sister lives in Dallas?"

She nodded, still laughing. "Sibyl hates cats. I keep them. She moves to Dallas."

I was almost disappointed. No skeleton in the basement. No great murder mystery to solve. "I wish my sister would move to Dallas." Selsie leaned so she could see my mouth better. "My sister!" I enunciated more clearly. "She's a pain. She mothers me and bosses me around, even though she's three years younger than me. And all she thinks about are shoes and Barbie dolls. It's disgusting."

I don't think Selsie caught it all, but she smiled and asked, "You don't got a girl?"

I thought of Elizabeth McDuffy and downed the rest of that cookie like I'd seen my dad throw back a shot of bourbon. "Well …," I began. "She's a Freshman. I'm just a seventh grader. She don't gimme the time of day. But she said I was cute once. That was a long time ago, though, when I was eight or something. Her being older ain't bad, is it?"

Selsie debated a long time, gnawing her lower lip. At last she sighed and told me to stay put. I heard her clattering around in the kitchen cabinets, drag out a step stool, and go fishing for something hard to reach. When she came back, she handed me a small glass bottle with a bulbous bottom and a narrow neck that was stopped with a cork and wax, the old-old-fashioned way. Inside was a liquid as red as lipstick and roses and Valentine's Day. On the side in worn gold letters, it said "Lov- -otion."

Selsie scratched at her nape like she was nervous or shy about giving it to me. "Your girl drink it. See you." She shrugged to indicate the rest.

I couldn't believe it! Maybe Jimmy was right, after all. "Does it really work?"

"Don't know. I was saving it. But … you need it."

Ah, the stacks of romance novels, the empty house, and a dusty old love potion that had been handled so much that the label had worn off.

I touched her arm. "Thanks, Selsie."

Jimmy was shivering outside the gate. "I was just about to go for the cops."

"Good cookies, man. You missed it."

"You didn't bring me one? Jackass."

We hopped on our bikes and raced home, me with a secret tucked in my pocket. It was the first I'd ever kept from Jimmy Harden. But I couldn't bring myself to tell him that he was right about Selsie. For Selsie's sake.

I resolved to somehow slip the love potion into Elizabeth's tea the next day in the cafeteria. That would be a feat that even Hercules would boast about.

Who in their right mind serves kids bowls of brown beans with cardboard that looks like cornbread? There was also something shaped like a pumpkin that I think was supposed to be a sugar cookie dyed orange, but after Selsie's peanut butter masterpieces, I turned up my nose and gave it to Tyrone. We had thirty minutes to scarf down the rest before the High Schoolers were released for lunch and we had to return to class, but I was so nervous I could hardly eat. All Adam, Tyrone, and Jimmy could talk about were plans for Halloween. Tyrone still wanted to go trick-or-treating. Adam was never allowed to go because his parents "didn't believe in it." Well, hell, who did? His friends always slipped him bags of candy, however, and they didn't seem to mind that.

The bell rang; High Schoolers began flooding the halls and lining up to claim their share of the sludge. Elizabeth McDuffy clustered near the front of the line with some other cheerleaders. Soon, she would be all mine. I double-checked my jacket pocket, felt the bulge of the glass bottle and tried not to look sneaky. Suave, gotta be suave. The older kids began filling up the tables, and Jimmy elbowed me. "C'mon, we gotta get."

I stalled as long as I could, gathering my tray, even sweeping crumbs off the table, which was against school etiquette. Finally, Elizabeth came through the line and, thank Heaven, she sat at the end of a table. I dumped my tray, dug the bottle from my pocket and readied my thumb to pop the cork. Only trick was, how to be on hand until she drank the tea and looked at me? How to keep her from looking at anyone else first? Nothing for it, I had try. Thinking "James Bond," I meandered back through the tables, trigger finger ready.

A foot shot out from under a table, hooked my ankle, and before I knew it, I was sprawled on the cafeteria floor, face planted in shoe-smudged beans.

Laughter roared. “Going for crumbs, Brisby?” Trev Reynolds asked, drawing his foot back into hiding. Across the table, Randy Tillman flicked bits of cornbread at me.

Oh, God! Elizabeth was looking! She’d seen the whole thing. She snorted with repressed laughter and turned away. I prayed, “Jesus, kill me now.”

The bottle! Where was the bottle? I snatched it up from under the next table and ran to the locker room where my mates dug books and pens from mini disaster areas. Tyrone’s eyebrows jumped. “Man, looks like you saw the janitor’s ghost.”

Jimmy cast me an I-told-you-so look that he’d inherited from his mother. “Them cookies making you hallucinate now?”

What could I tell them? I slapped my forehead into my palm, thinking, “James Bond, hell! You’re the biggest loser ever, Colton Brisby.”

By the end of the day, I had bounced back. I’d have plenty of chances to try again. Four years’ worth, in fact, before Elizabeth graduated and fled Saint Claire forever.

Halloween arrived at last. As soon as the sun went down, the doorbell started ringing. Dad handed out candy, while Mom and Melissa prepared to join the painted throngs haunting the sidewalks. Of course, my little sister dressed up as a Barbie doll. The mermaid version of Barbie. I started to tell her that she looked royally dumb with her feet sticking out of her pink fishtail, but Dad thumped me upside the head and kissed his Barbie-mermaid-princess on her rouged cheek and sent her off with a wave. “You look great, honey. Y’all be back in an hour, hear?”

While he waited for the doorbell, he watched the early evening news, and I purloined Mom’s carton of eggs from the fridge and slipped out the door. Under the vampire cloak I wore last year, I was decked out in black. Jimmy and Tyrone had agreed to meet me at the Elementary playground. They were hanging out under an oak tree when I got there. We ditched our costumes and Jimmy passed around the black shoe polish. Smearing it all over his face, he said, “We’re gonna get creamed.” At least tonight he sounded excited about it. Tyrone had brought a paper bag full of egg cartons. His mom raised chickens and sold the eggs to nearly everybody in town. “If she knew I took these,” he said, handing us each a carton, “she’d skin me.”

“It’s just once a year, Ty,” I said, tucking eggs into the pockets of my sweat suit alongside the love potion. I never knew when I’d run into Elizabeth and get the chance to slip it to her. Maybe tonight. Please, God, make it be tonight.

We started off up the street, a carton apiece stuck under our arms.

“How does this work, anyway?” asked Tyrone. “We just start throwing ‘em?”

“Ain’t you ever watched the big kids go egging?”

“Always had to go home too early.”

In truth, we betrayed our inexperience by showing up with our eggs before it was fully dark. In the meantime, we rang a few doorbells for lack of anything better to do, and while I munched a Tootsie pop (letting the stick hang out of my mouth like it was a cigarette), I began to notice that the number of trick-or-treaters was dwindling. The moon glowed bright above the oak trees; lights on front porches started flicking out. The time had come.

I heard Tyrone gulp in the dark. “We should go back to my place and watch scary movies.”

“Yeah . . . ” Jimmy began. That’s when we heard the roar of trucks and shrill war

cries in the distance. At the end of the block, a pair of shadows slunk between crepe myrtle bushes.

Half crouching, half running, we hurried up the sidewalk, looking for cover.

Randy Tillman's flaming dragon of a truck sped around the corner. The two shadows sprang up, shrieking bloody murder, and flung little white bombs as it passed. The eggs shattered on the side panels, some sailed through the open windows, and whoever rode inside flung eggs right back, hollering for revenge. Neither Jimmy, Tyrone, nor myself dared throw eggs at our archenemies. We ducked behind the trees lining the street and waited for the truck to disappear. We could hear it roaring for several blocks, so we knew when we were safe. We tore after the shadows who fled into the night.

Turning onto Ranch Avenue, we stopped and stared at the math teacher's house. Every tree and bush in Mr. Jamison's front lawn was draped in toilet paper. "Math sucks," written in whipped cream, slipped down the large front windows.

Tyrone cried out. "Something hit me!"

An egg sailed past my head. Across the street, a voice cried, "Get 'em! Smear the little shits!"

I palmed an egg and lobbed it at the shadows running toward us. In the light from the streetlamp I watched it strike home. The shadow doubled over, squealing and grabbing his bruised forehead. His fingers strung with egg yoke. Jimmy tugged my sleeve and off we ran, stopping every few feet to lob eggs at our pursuers. God, it was fun. Just like a war film.

Eventually, we joined forces with a gang of eighth graders and a couple of Freshmen. They weren't exactly the cool kids, but we weren't in a position to be choosy. The major drawback was that Rebecca Duckett lurked on the outskirts of the group. Though she was a Junior, only the younger kids would let her tag along. She wore a gray sweatshirt instead of black and appeared to be everyone's favorite target. Her matted hair was wet with egg, and yoke smeared her clothes. She didn't carry a single egg to defend herself, but followed us around with a scowl on her face and her arms crossed over her copious chest. Her presence was a threat to our budding reputations, so we stayed as far from her as possible without sacrificing our safety inside the crowd. Still, I couldn't help but wonder if Selsie had suffered the same sort of ostracizing when she was in school and finally offered Rebecca an egg. After that she stuck to me like a wad of gum on my shoe.

When I rolled my eyes in Jimmy's direction, he chuckled and said, "You shoulda known better. Feed the cat and it keeps coming around."

I was about to suggest we ditch this party, when an old blue sedan pulled around the block, paused in the street and revved up, challenging us. "Hey, that's full of cheerleaders!" Tyrone cried. "Get 'em!"

Cheerleaders! Elizabeth. What were the chances? The windows lowered and eggs started flying. Rebecca ducked behind me like I was her knight in shining armor. I gave her a shove. "Go pick on somebody else!" I shouted. Then, as I turned back to the battle, hands full of ammunition, an egg caught me under the left eye. I dropped like a stone. For a minute I didn't know which way was up, which was down. I feared my eye had burst out of the socket, but it was only yoke I scraped off my face. Groaning, I rolled over on the pavement and for a moment I was sure I was dreaming: Elizabeth McDuffy leaned over me, red curls tumbling from under a black stocking cap. "You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," I grunted, sat up, and declared more exuberantly, "Yeah!"

"Sorry," she said, squeezed my arm, then jumped back into the sedan. It sped off, taking my heart with it.

I was so enraptured that I'd forgotten the love potion. Nor did I hear the growl of Tillman's dragon approaching. Tires squealed, rubber burned, and those headlights chased us down. Jimmy dragged me to my feet and we dived clear. Eggs smashed all around us, so we returned fire. "Brisby!" I heard as the truck roared past. The driver hit the brakes.

"Shit! Here they come," shouted Jimmy. We scattered, but Trev Reynolds was our best running back. I stood no chance. In an instant he had the hood of my sweatshirt, and my collar jerked tight as a noose. I kicked and swatted just like those cats under the bridge. Trev dragged me back toward the truck where Joey Osborn and Randy Tillman had collected a handful of others and were smashing eggs over their heads. Rebecca Duckett took the abuse in stoic silence. Jimmy and Tyrone were not among them. I feared they'd abandoned me until eggs flew from around the nearest oak. Randy and Joey hurried after them.

"Pat 'em down!" Trev ordered. "Don't you little girls know it's dangerous out here?" Joey confiscated our eggs, while Randy gathered the candy from Tyrone's paper bag and added it to their stash in the truck. How many other kids had they robbed tonight?

Trev searched my pockets. Clucking his tongue, he broke every egg he found over my head. With slime dripping down my face, I vowed to cheer for every football team but ours.

"Hey, what's this?" He held up the love potion.

"No!" I cried, grabbing for it.

He tossed it to Randy. "I think it's fake blood. We can make good use of that."

"Nah, man," said Randy, holding the bottle up to the streetlamp and gazing through the ruby liquid. "It's that syrupy stuff little kids like. I used to drink this stuff all the time and gross out my sisters." To prove it, he popped the cork and swallowed every last drop.

"Oh, no, no, no," I whimpered.

Tillman started staggering around, groaning, and blinking like he couldn't see straight. "What the hell was that stuff, Brisby?"

I threw my arm over my face, and who should Randy Tillman clap eyes on first but poor Rebecca Duckett. He swept her up and laid one on her. She shoved him away, but he caught her again in a way that made me think of Pepé Le Pew.

Trev Reynolds dropped me flat and seized Randy by the arm. "Don't make me barf, man. What the hell you doin'?"

Randy just grinned, all doe-eyed, and hugged Rebecca around the neck. "This is my girl. Hey, don't look at her like that! I'll bust your face in."

Trev and Joey exchanged a confounded expression, then looked at me. "What the hell'd you give him?" Trev shouted.

"I didn't give him nothing! You stole it, douche-bag."

He grabbed my collar and raised a fist. "What was it?"

"Nothing!"

Jimmy picked up the bottle, turned it over, examining it. "The witch give you this?"

Why, Jimmy? Why didn't you keep your mouth shut?

"Witch?" asked Joey Osborn. "Ain't no such thing."

Trev watched his best friend necking on the school skank and said, "That crazy lady who lives on Mistletoe?"

"She's not a witch!" I cried.

"Like hell! Look at 'em! Is that where you got it?"

I shook my head.

"Lyin' sack of shit. Joey, she's gotta be the real thing. Go get the boys."

"No! You leave her alone!"

Trev pushed me so hard I fell on my backside. He and Joey dragged Randy into the truck and sped off, leaving rubber for half the block. Rebecca ran after them, calling, "Wait!"

"Oh, shit," I kept saying, turning in a panicked circle. "We have to warn her. C'mon." I didn't wait to see if Jimmy and Tyrone followed. I doubt either could keep up with me, even if they had. Reaching home, I dragged my bike out of the garage. Dad called from the kitchen, but there was no time. Randy's dragon could be there already. I peddled so fast I thought my heart would burst. The house on Mistletoe Lane was dark but for one dim light in the living room window. "Selsie!" I called, running up the walk, then remembered shouting was useless. I banged on the door, on the window, waved my hands like a maniac. Selsie glanced up from the novel she was reading and leapt from the old armchair. Did I even look like myself, with shoe polish on my face and egg soaking my hair? I jabbed my fingers back toward town, made sure my expression was appropriately desperate, and finally she unlocked the door.

"Selsie, they're coming!" I said.

She read my lips but failed to understand my meaning.

"Trev Reynolds and his bullies are *coming*." I tried to speak slowly, shape the words clearly, but I was panting hard, and I was so scared of what they meant to do. "They found the love potion. They think you're a witch and they're coming here!"

"Who?" she asked. "Police?"

"No! Boys from school. Mean boys. You have to leave. Come to my house."

She backed away, shaking her head. How long since she'd left her house? How did she get groceries and cat food if she never left? "You have to! Please!" Grabbing her wrist, I tried hauling her toward the door, but Selsie squealed like my hands were made of fire. I'd never seen such a freak out, not even when my sister got her Barbies taken away from her. It scared me so bad I released her and damn near started crying.

A roar down the street. The dragon was coming. I ran to the window, peered through the grime. Randy Tillman's truck pulled up outside the gate, and the biggest boys in High School bailed out of the back. Trev climbed out of the driver's seat and called toward the house, "We know you're in there, witch! We've seen what you can do, and we don't like it. We'll give you till the count of three to show yourself, then we start firing."

Firing? With bullets? Surely not with eggs. Someone clicked a lighter and lit a cigarette. Trev started the countdown, "One!"

Selsie had stopped freaking out and hovered over my shoulder, staring out the window. "What are they saying?"

I gave her a nudge toward the kitchen. "Back door. Run. I'll stall 'em."

"Two!"

Sure I was going to get the crap beaten out of me, I hopped across the rotten porch and hurried down the sidewalk. “Y’all leave Selsie alone! She ain’t hurting nobody.”

“Brisby! I knew it,” said Trev.

“Selsie can’t hear you anyway. She’s deaf. Please! Leave her alone.”

“Grab that little turd and make him shut up.”

One of the team linemen was built just like a gorilla. He jumped the fence, nabbed me by the sleeve, and pinched me in a headlock till I thought my brains would burst.

“She’s a witch, deaf or not,” said Trev. “Three!”

The screen door banged, and Selsie emerged. Just as she had run to scoop up the wounded cat, so she ran at the lineman holding me hostage. She loosed that horrifying, strangled scream of outrage and raked her nails across his face. The lineman let me go and staggered back into the fence, breaking a big gap in it with his meaty ass. His teammates dragged him to safety. “Let’s get out of here!” some cried. Others demanded, “Burn it up, Trev. C’mon!”

“Read my lips, witch,” said Trev, pointing at his mouth. “We don’t want you here. Saint Claire is our town, and we mean to keep it safe.”

Whether she got the message or not, her fingers started flying with God knows what kind of curses, obscenities, and warnings.

“What are you gonna do? Cast a spell on us?” Trev taunted, mocking her with his fingers. “You gonna leave town, or do we have to get serious?”

I planted myself in front of Selsie, preparing to plead some more. She clenched my shoulders and together we started backing for the house.

“Light it up, Curtis,” Trev ordered.

The idiot with the lighter set fire to a strip of fabric tucked into the mouth of a beer bottle. Trev seized it and hurled it like a football. The bottle sailed high, snagged in one of the arborvitaes, dropped straight down and burst under the porch. Fire exploded. The stink of burning gasoline wafted past on the wind.

“Stop!” I shouted. With her mouth open in silent horror, Selsie watched the flame lick up the porch railing.

Three more bottles sailed across the yard. One busted on the roof. Another through the second story window. The last bounced off the arborvitae and set flame to the jungle of weeds in the front lawn.

“Burn the witch! Burn the witch!” The chant filled the night as the fire spread. The brave jocks didn’t dare cross the fence, however, and actually lay hands on Selsie. Burning her house satisfied them just fine.

Selsie turned me, shook me by the shoulders. “Cat!” she cried. “Cat!”

“They’ll run out,” I said, but the fire had nearly engulfed the house already. All those stacks of books and the old dry wood provided an ample feast.

“Cat!” she screamed and ran for the house.

“No, Selsie!” I chased her as far as the porch. She hopscotched over the flames and rotten planks and disappeared inside.

The frenzied chant withered; the jocks watched the house just as I did, waiting. Afraid. I could see it their faces. They realized the weight of what they’d done. “Do something!” I shouted. “Call somebody!”

Randy Tillman started his truck. The lineman with the scratched face bellowed, “I’m getting outta here!” Some fled on foot. Some vaulted into the bed of the truck just

before it sped off. Trev Reynolds missed his chance, so did three others. They cursed Randy for leaving them behind. When sirens wailed in the distance, they took off, disappearing down one street or another. I ran, too, afraid the cops would pin the fire on me. In the empty, overgrown lot across the street, I collapsed behind a boxwood, crying, and watched Saint Claire's only fire engine go to work. The bright stream of water seemed to turn to steam before it hit the house. Wade arrived amid flashing lights and screaming siren. I heard him tell the fire chief, " 'Bout time that old place gave up the ghost."

"How long's it been empty?" asked the chief.

"I don't think it was. Crazy woman lived there."

"Damn. Nobody could survive that inferno. When it's out, we'll look for bodies."

They found bodies, all right. Lots of them. Eight cats, in fact, charred to the bone. But they never found Selsie. I like to think she snatched her black cat and her broom on the way out the back door and flew through the night, all the way to Dallas, where she lives to this day in her sister's posh apartment. But who's to say? Strange, lonely creature like that might well have turned into a beam of moonlight and escaped all our hatred and suspicion, and so much the better for her.

The love potion wore off eventually, but only after Randy and Rebecca had eloped. She came home, brokenhearted and crying, a few weeks later, and Randy lost his status as "one of the good ol' boys," not because he'd married Rebecca, but because he kicked her out. Nobody but Jimmy Harden and me believed Randy's story about being ensorcelled, and we never said a word. So maybe there's a little justice to be found in Saint Claire, after all.

Five years later, I left for college in St. Louis without once landing a date with Elizabeth McDuffy. By then, she was married anyway and running a beauty shop on Main Street. Me? I had to get out. Saint Claire had become stifling, as most small towns do for most boys. I have traveled half the country, England and France, but everywhere I go, there is something to remind me of home, and of Selsie. I still get cravings for peanut butter cookies, but none equal hers. I have followed countless cats, hoping they would lead me to her. And the sight of trick-or-treaters and the clatter of dry leaves along the sidewalk bring her to mind every October. So who knows? Maybe Jimmy was right. Maybe Selsie ensorcelled me, too.

No. Enchanted, and the spell has yet to diminish.

Past The Patch
Edited by Brian Fatah Steele
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Halloween - a holiday that evokes so much. Some say it's a time when the space between worlds is too thin to bear the weight, and outer things spill over for a bit of Trick Or Treating. The stories found inside this e-anthology echo that idea, reporting back from a corner where the mirror has reflected a distorted image of this season.

Inside we'll find a young man's madness has driven him down a bloody path and the brutal folklore of the early 19th century clawed to life. We'll see domestic bliss marred only by suburban lycanthropy and retail employees devoured by cosmic malevolence. Witches, monsters, and maniacs as written by authors of fantasy, adventure, mystery, poetry, romance and horror. We'll dig deeper into a celebration now known for masks, candy and pumpkins while immersing ourselves in this anthology. Here, we'll go past the patch and discover what tales lurk on the other side.